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A STORY.

De la Rampe, Louise.

11

By OUIDA, *pseud.*

AUTHOR OF "PUCK," "ARIADNÉ," "SIGNA," ETC.

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A PROPOS.

A frog that dwelt in a ditch spat at a worm that bore a lamp.

“Why do you do that?” said the glowworm.

“Why do you shine?” said the frog.



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AVANT-PROPOS.

WHEN Zeus, half in sport and half in cruelty, made man, young Hermês, who, as all Olympus knew, was for ever at some piece of mischief, insisted on meddling with his father's work, and got leave to fashion the human ear out of a shell that he chanced to have by him, across which he stretched a fine cobweb that he stole from Arachne. But he hollowed and twisted the shell in such a fashion that it would turn back all sounds except very loud blasts that Falsehood should blow on a brazen horn, whilst the impenetrable web would keep out all such whispers as Truth could send up from the depths of her well.

Hermês chuckled as he rounded the curves of his ear, and fastened it on to the newly-made Human Creature.

"So shall these mortals always hear and believe the thing that is not," he said to himself in glee—knowing that the box he would give to Pandora would not bear more confused and complex woes to the hapless earth than this gift of an ear to man.

But he forgot himself so far that, though two ears were wanted, he only made one.

Apollo, passing that way, marked the blunder, and resolved to avenge the theft of his milk-white herds which had led him such a weary chase through Tempe.

Apollo took a pearl of the sea and hollowed it, and strung across it a silver string from his own lyre, and with it gave to man one ear by which the voice of Truth should reach the brain.

"You have spoilt all my sport," said the boy Hermês, angry and weeping.

"Nay," said the elder brother, with a smile. "Be comforted. The brazen trumpets will be sure to drown the whisper from the well, and ten thousand mortals to one, be sure, will always turn by choice your ear instead of mine."

FRIENDSHIP.

CHAPTER I.

"It is a pull, sister," said the elder Miss Moira, of Craig Moira, to the younger.

"It is a pull, sister. But we promised Archie."

"We promised Archie, and I'm wishful to see how she gets on wi' the man that sold carpets."

So the carriage, bearing the Misses Moira, of Craig Moira, their plaids, pugs, ear-trumpets, and courier, continued its course across the Roman Campagna, and up the steep and wooded roads that led to the old Castle of Fiordelisa.

The Misses Moira, of Moira, lived on their own lands in Caithness, were very rich, very ugly, very eccentric, spoke with a strong native accent, and delivered their opinions uncalled for; two of their sister's children were respectively the Duchess of Forfar and the Marquis of Fingal; the younger was the echo of the elder—both wore spectacles, both were deaf; and neither ever forgot that the Moiras, of Craig Moira, had the right to sit before their sovereign, and were allied with half the bluest blood and highest names in Great Britain.

They were now about to call on one of their connections, and gazed anxiously through their spectacles for the Castle of Fiordelisa, where she dwelt. Fiordelisa came at last in sight, a grey, rambling, and ancient pile, set amidst cypress and ilex woods, with its gardens straying down into its farm-lands in Italian fashion, covering hills and plains with corn and vine and olive.

"A braw place this, but ill-kept," said the elder Miss Moira, as they entered a dark avenue of ancient oaks, "and has the idolatrous emblems even at the very gates."

She shut her eyes not to see the Pietà let into the wall under the woods, and kept them shut lest she should see any more such sigus. They had been brought into the land of such mummeries

under protest by the dangerous illness of a beloved sister, mother of her young Grace of Forfar, at Naples, and the sister being restored to health, they were hastening away from the scene of abominations, only pausing a few days in Rome because the younger of them was somewhat of an invalid, and unequal to rapid travelling.

The sudden stoppage of the carriage made the elder Miss Moira open her eyes. They had arrived at the entrance door of Fiordelisa.

Between the centre columns of a beautiful loggia, built by Bramante, there was standing a handsome, black-browed woman, a little in advance of two gentlemen, who stood one on each side of her, awaiting the arrival of the guests.

She was the Lady Joan Challoner.

With ardour and cordial eagerness of welcome she rushed down the stone steps and darted to the carriage.

"Oh, dearest Miss Moira, how kind of you! And dear Miss Elizabeth, too. How sorry I am not to be in Rome! We go down for good the day after to-morrow. If I had only known you were coming there, of course I should have gone in last week. Let me present them to you—Mr. Challoner; Prince Ioris. Come in, pray, out of the sun. Yes, even in November it is oppressively warm. You must be overladen with all those plaids. Robert—Io——"

"*Enchanté d l'honneur de vous voir, mesdames,*" murmured a tall, graceful, dark-eyed person, with a sweet smile and a low bow, coming forward on to the first step, and offering his arm to the old gentlewoman.

"Hoot toot, man! Canna ye speak yer own tongue?" said the elder Miss Moira sharply, accepting the arm of her host, as she thought, and entering the house with him, whilst her sister followed with their hostess, who was talking eagerly into her ear-trumpet; the other gentleman, who had a Scotch face and a German manner, and looked like a fusion between a Leipzig philologist and an American senator, made a feeble attempt to offer his arm as well, but hesitated, not seeing very well how to do it, and halted midway, making believe to hold back a barking Clumber spaniel.

The whole party passed into the loggia, and thence into the first great apartment opening out from it, where some twenty other people, English and American residents of Rome, had been gathered to do honour to the Misses Moira, of Moira, and were taking tea, eating grapes, and looking at pictures and china. Seated, the two ladies looked round the noble tapestried guest-chamber with some bewilderment and some vague displeasure.

"So ye're Joan Perth-Douglas that was?" said the elder Miss Moira, bringing her spectacles to bear on her hostess. "Ye

were a slip of twelve when we saw ye last—twenty years ago, aye, twenty years and more. Will ye tell me why your good husband talks French to us?”

“Allow me, madam,” murmured the gentleman who looked like a Leipzig philologist and an American senator, offering to relieve her of her plaids.

“Don’t be officious, man!” said Miss Moira, sharply. “My sister’s no richt in the lungs, and your master’s house is draughtly.”

The gentleman shrank back.

“I never saw a Scot so dark as your good husband, Joan,” pursued the elder Miss Moira, adhering to her original thoughts, sternly fastening her glasses upon the graceful and dark-eyed personage, who murmured a soft and perplexed “Plaît-il, Madame?”

“Have you lived among Papists till you’ve forgot every word of the tongue you were born to, sir?” asked Miss Moira of him, believing that she was addressing a fellow-countryman.

“You must be inconvenienced by all those plaids, madam. Do allow me——” commenced in a kind of despair the other person who had been scouted.

“Canna ye wait till ye’re spoke to!” said the lady, turning on him in wrath at the interference. “Canna ye teach your servants better ways, Laddy Joan, than to gird at a body like that? A very brown man for a Scot your husband, though extraordinary well-favoured. How comes it he canna talk his own tongue?”

“That is not my husband,” said the Lady Joan hurriedly, with a flush rising on her face and a laugh to her eyes. “You are mistaken, dear Miss Moira. I introduce people so badly; this is only Ioris, a friend, you know. My husband, Mr. Challoner, you’ve been taking for a servant, and scolding about your plaids.”

The well-bred twenty people who were taking tea at Fior-delisa were not so perfectly well-bred that they could help a little titter as they listened.

“Prut-tut!” cried the elder Miss Moira, with her head higher in the air, being a person who never recognised her own errors, let them be made manifest as they might. “*This* man received us, certainly he received us, at the door (I am correect, sister?). Certainly he received us, Laddy Joan. If *you* be master here,” she demanded with sudden vigour of the gentleman whom she was informed was Mr. Challoner, as he returned with a cup of tea and a cream-jug—“if *you* be master here, why don’t you behave like it? Are you master, eh?”

Mr. Challoner, conscious of the twenty well-bred people and the irrepressible ill-bred titter, begged Miss Moira to tell him if she took much sugar or little.

"I can sugar for myself!" said that lady with asperity. "So *you* are Luddy Joan's husband, are you? You don't seem to conduct yourself like it. But I thought the other was very dark for a Scot."

"Do you take cream, madam?" murmured Mr. Challoner, bending his back stiffly over the silver jug, whilst Miss Moira stared with stony gaze at the coronets and coats of arms on the chairs.

"Whose quarterings are those?" she demanded. "They're none known north o' Tweed, nor north o' Thames either for that matter; the shape o' the shield——"

"Dear Miss Moira, allow me——," said the Lady Joan, avoiding heraldry by bringing up a small division of the twenty well-bred people for presentation. But Miss Moira was not to be so lightly diverted from her purpose. Having bent her head as many times as politeness required, she retained her grasp on Mr. Challoner, and returned to her original investigations. "A fine place," she resumed, letting her spectacles rove from the timber roof to the mosaic floor; "a fine place; is it your own?"

Mr. Challoner murmured inarticulately, and stooped for the sugar-tongs.

"Bought it?" said Miss Moira sharply.

"No—not precisely."

"Hired it?"

"Not exactly. That is, at least——"

Mr. Challoner shifted his eyeglass, and, being an exact man, paused to find an exact word.

"Oh, my gude soul, then if ye've na bought it and na hired it, it's na yours at all, and what for be ye speering to ask us into it?"

Mr. Challoner wondered to himself why an unkind Providence would move old maiden ladies from their own safe ingle-nooks by grey Atlantic shores, and muttered something of "a friend, an old friend."

"Oh, it's the dark man's, is it? He don't look old," said Miss Moira, "and you and your good luddy live in it out of friendship. Is that the custom in this papistical country, pray, sir?"

Mr. Challoner murmured that he thought it was the custom—"the houses were so large, the nobility were so poor——"

"And has *he* a good lady? What does she say to it? Certainly, Luddy Joan asked us out here as to her *own* place. Quite clearly—her own place. I am correct, sister?"

"Quite correct, sister. Her own place."

"Ioris is not married," said Mr. Challoner, wondering if he could drop the sugar-tongs again without too much awkwardness. "He is a good fellow. We are very much attached to

him. Will you like to see my greenhouses? I am curious in the *Nymphæas—cyanea—caerulea—rubra.*"

"A pond-lily's a puir feckless taste for a man," said Miss Moira severely. "Archie asked us to come and see his daughter, and so we came. But certainly when she wrote to us she said her 'own place'—most distinctly her own place."

"Oh, she has got into the habit of calling it so, she has done so much for it——"

"But if it be the young man's——"

Lady Joan Challoner begged at that moment to present to Miss Moira an Anglican clergyman.

The Anglican clergyman disposed of, Miss Moira, of Craig Moira, returned to the charge.

"Eh, but it must be a perilous experiment—twa masters under one roof."

"Eh, it must, indeed," murmured the younger Miss Moira. "Mony voices make muckle strife."

"Ay, they do. Tell me now, do you twa good gentlemen never fash one another?"

"Never," said Mr. Challoner cordially, but his cold light eyes fell as he spoke.

"Then ye're just no human, sir," said Miss Moira with emphasis; "and Joan Perth-Douglas had always a sharp tongue of her own. Perth-Douglas women never were easy to live with. You seem a quiet body yourself, but still——"

"Let me show you my wife's fowls. The fame of the poultry of Craig Moira——", commenced Mr. Challoner.

"Still, I think you're no wise, and so I'll tell Archie," continued Miss Moira, not to be moved even by praise of her poultry-yard. "It's a queer way of living, and certainly she said her own place, 'her own place;' and ye'll take no offence, for I always speak my mind, but that Papist's a deal too bonny to look at, and Leddy Joan's a young woman still."

"My dear madam! I have not the most distant idea of your meaning——"

"Then ye're just a fule, sir," said Miss Moira sharply.

"Will you look at my wife's poultry? She has some spangled bantams that——"

"Eh? Joan Perth-Douglas has taken to cocks and hens and bubbly-jocks, has she? Weel, there's no accounting for conversions. Perth-Douglas women were always a handful. I've known three generations of them, and they always were masterful. Dear douce Archie never daured say his soul was his own. Yes, I'll come and see your chicks and stove plants. But how can they be yours if the place is the Papist's?"

"It was a tumble-down old barrack. We have spent a good deal on it. One is always glad to do good to a friend," murmured Mr. Challoner, a little vaguely, offering his arm to his tormentor.

"Humph!" said the elder Miss Moira with a sniff.

"We are quite farmers here, you know," Mr. Challoner continued, leading the way through courts and chambers to the open air. "The whole thing had gone to rack and ruin when we took it in hand. Italians are so improvident, and the national habits are so wasteful. But my wife's energy is wonderful; whatever she undertakes prospers——"

"Humph!" said the elder Miss Moira once more. "And the handsome Papist, is he grateful to ye for her energy?"

"Oh, don't talk about gratitude. There is no question of that! We are always glad to be of use to our friends, and Ioris is an excellent fellow. Ask Lord Archie."

Lord Archie was an idol of Craig Moira, and his word was law there. Miss Moira was softened by it, and her suspicions were mollified. She consented to be conducted through the greenhouses, praised the bantams, and only sniffed a little as she passed the open door of the castle chapel, where some peasants were going in for vespers. She returned in a more amiable frame of mind to her sister and her sofa, and relented enough to take a fresh cup of tea and some fruit, which was handed her with exquisite grace by the Prince Ioris. Miss Moira's eyes through their spectacles followed the Prince Ioris to the other end of the large reception room.

"He's an elegant-made man and a taking one," she said to her host; "and I think ye're no wise to live in the same house with him. Oh, ye've no need to glower and look glum: an old body like me can tell truth without fashin' anybody, and ye know that we and Archie's people have foregathered all our lives, and it never was hid from us that Joan Perth-Douglas was masterful, and had her cantrips. Lord, man! Do ye think they'd have wedded her to a mere decent body like you, if she hadn't been a handful? Not they; they're proud-stomached, and ye sold carpets and the like in Bagdad."

"Really, madam——" Mr. Challoner shifted his eyeglass, and felt that this kind of amiability was worse to bear than the previous antagonism.

"Hoot! it's no sort of use giving yourself bobberies with us. We know all about you," said Miss Moira pleasantly. "Your forebears were decent folks, dwellers on my cousin Allandale's lands on the Borden for mony a generation, pious canny bodies, but sma' traders all. I mind well when I was a bit lassie, and staying at Allandale's, buying tapes and pins and what not, at your grandmother's little shop. She sold snuff and letter papers, and had the post, and sold stamps as weel—twa bawbee stamps they were in those days. Ye mind it too, don't ye, sister?"

"Richt well, sister. She sold sweeties too."

"Lord, man, it's sma' blame to ye. Your folk were all decent folk in the Cheviots, and true believers. But I'll not

deny that when ye stuck up on your countin'-house stool so high that ye mated with Archie's daughter, we did set our necks stiff, and——”

Mr. Challoner threw down a piece of majolica. It belonged to the house, and would cost him nothing, and the crash of the falling vase spared him more recollections of Allandale.

“Sister, we must be going. The sun's well-nigh down,” said the elder Miss Moira, when the majolica was picked up. “Now, sir, take an old woman's word, and don't disremember that your good leddy's a Perth-Douglas, and Perth-Douglas women are always like bucking fillies; and the Papist's got a face o' grace and a pretty way with him. Oh, you may get on your high horse as ye like! Sense is sense. Still, I'm glad to see ye have such a trust in your wife, and it speaks well for ye both, and shows she's given over her cantrips; and I'm sorry I fashed ye about your grandame, but there's nothing to be ashamed of, nothing at all. She was a good clean religious body, and I'm not one to look down on ye because ye are not what we are, though I'm free to own when they married Joan to ye we quarrelled with Archie, as far as anybody ever can quarrel with him, the fair sweet-spoken soul——”

Mr. Challoner, conscious of a sudden silence that had fallen on the twenty well-bred people scattered about, behind and around him, in which the voice of his torturer fell horribly loud and distinct, wished that the mosaic floor would open as the gulf for Curtius.

“Joan's a fine-featured woman,” pursued Miss Moira, rising in all her plaids, “but she's a Perth-Douglas, and she's got a wild eye. You mind my word when I'm gone. Look after her well with the Papist. And now, gude day, and many thanks to ye, Liddy Joan. I'm mighty glad to see ye've taken to such a sober thing as tillin' land and fatten' fowls, and I hope ye'll keep steady at it; and, yes, to be sure, I'll remember ye to my niece Forfar, though she's never seen ye, and I doubt if she's ever heard o' ye, and ye're scarce cousin to her, as ye're sayin'—it's very far away, indeed; one of your forebears in the last century married the then duke's seventh daughter, and they were Archie's father's great-grandfather's cousins-german—still it counts, oh yes, it counts, and I'll give her your love for certain; and so I'll bid ye fareweel, and many thanks to ye, and we'll return it in kind whenever ye come north again. And I suppose ye don't travel with the Papist, but ye can explain to him that we'd be glad to see him in Caithness, for it might be the saving of his soul if he came in reach of the true doctrine, and our minister would weary the Lord for him night and day, for he is a personable man and a courteous, and it is sad to think he will burn in the life everlasting.”

“Mille remerciements, Mesdames, et à revoir,” murmured the

Prince Ioris, vaguely gathering that they were wishing him well, and offering them a bouquet of autumnal heliotrope and Louise de Savoie roses.

The Miss Moiras accepted the flowers, and drove away in state, pugs, plaids, car-trumpets, courier, and all, on their return journey towards Rome.

"There is a deal in manner, sister," said the elder Miss Moira, as she smelt the heliotrope.

"There is, sister. What were ye meaning?"

"That the Papist has a manner, and that the carpet man hasn't," replied the elder Miss Moira. "Let us hope that Leddy Joan canna see the difference, and has steadied down. But I have my doubts, sister."

"And ye do well to have your doubts, sister. Ye were ever very sharp o' sight."

The elder Miss Moira sniffed with scorn the bland air of the Roman twilight.

"It needs but half an eye, Elizabeth, to see that a Perth-Douglas woman loves her cantrips, and that the Papist is a deal bonnier to look at than the person that sold carpets. But she was very civil, and her gude man seems a well-meaning douce body, and she's steadied down; I shall say so everywhere; she's steadied down, and we must do all we can for her, sister. She is Archie's daughter."

"She is Archie's daughter, sister."

The elder Miss Moira would have changed her amicable intentions if she could have seen her hostess dancing a waltz in the loggia, and snapping her fingers after the vanishing carriage.

"The hateful old cats!" cried the Lady Joan, "I thought they'd never go! Wretched old women! Why didn't you stop their tongues, Robert? And what an ass *you* were, Io, receiving them like that. Of course they couldn't help finding out the house was yours, and old idiots like those will never understand——"

"They were good harmless people," said the Prince Ioris, in his own tongue, a little timidly, standing under the arch of his loggia, and watching the sunset.

"Stuff! They are the most horrid old harridans in existence. But every old hag seems good to you. I do believe you see good in everybody! The idea, too, of wasting those roses on 'em! Roses sell for half a franc apiece now. And giving them yourself, too! They've been boring Mr. Challoner to death about what you are here, and whose the house is. But you're always doing something ridiculous. Only remember this. Give your head away with the roses next time, if you like, only all I insist is—don't compromise *me*!"

The Prince Ioris was silent. He leaned against a column of the loggia, and watched the sun go down behind the hills.

Lady Joan Challoner and her husband went within to the twenty well-bred people, and busied themselves pleasantly with them, and gave parting smiles and Muscat grapes to some, and retained a few to dinner.

Meanwhile, the Miss Moiras rolled onward to Rome through the descending mists of evening, and nodding amidst their cushions, fell asleep, until roused by the cessation of all movement, and a voice they knew, they were startled to find that the carriage was entering the gates of Rome. A gentleman, old, bent, feeble, smiled and nodded, came up and shook hands, as the horses were stopped for a moment by the pressure of traffic. This gentleman was Lord George Scrope-Stair, an old acquaintance and a privileged person.

"You have been to see Pope Joan?" he said, with a little laugh. "Did you like Fiordelisa?" and he nodded and laughed again. "Ah! yes, we always call her Pope Joan; I do, at least, when my daughters don't hear me; Pope Joan keeps the keys of both heaven and earth and ousts Peter out of his own palace, you know! Only my little joke; don't tell the girls. Good night."

And the old man, who had been once a dandy and a beau in days when George the Fourth was King, walked onward in the twilight, chuckling feebly.

"Pope Joan!" echoed Miss Moira of Moira, as their carriage rolled over the stones. "Sister, I wish we had not gone to the place!"

"So do I, sister," said the echo.

They went peacefully home to their hotel and dined, with misgivings weighing on their souls; and then being tired slept again until the elder Miss Moira awoke from a blissful doze with a start.

"I wonder whose the place really is, sister?" she mumbled as she yawned.

"I wonder, sister," said the echo.

CHAPTER II.

It was sunset on the Pincio on the first day of December. Beyond St. Peter's there was that sky of purple and of gold which always seems so much more marvellous here than it does anywhere else; that roseleaf warmth and soft transparency of flame-like colour which those who have looked on it never will forget so long as their lives shall last on earth.

Below, loud, cracked, discordant bells were chiming one against another; near at hand a military band was playing, very fast and very much out of tune, waltzes of Strauss's; a monk, the worse for wine, was screaming homilies from a bench, and guards were vainly striving to arrest him amidst the laughter of the crowd; but nothing spoiled the grandeur of the scene, or could destroy the sublime calmness of the declining day, as the broken green lines of the hills grew black against the burning scarlet of the clouds, and the vast expanse of roofs and spires, cupolas and towers, obelisks and gardens, ruins and palaces, colossal temples and desolate marshes, that is all called Rome, stretched away wide and vague and solemn as a desert; with a sun, nearly as red and rayless as the desert's, hanging above the cross on the great dome.

It was four o'clock; and there was the customary crowd of fashionable idlers, fretting horses, emblazoned carriages, sauntering dandies, handsome artists, tired invalids, black-robed priests and scarlet-clad janitors, cuirassed soldiers and curly headed children, violet-gowned seminarists and purple-gowned scholars, and, first and foremost, fashionable ladies chattering at the top of their voices about the first fox-hunt of the year, the first court ball, the new arrivals, and the Pope's state of health.

The sun was going down in majesty behind the round domes raised to lay the restless soul of Nero; but up here on the hill nobody scarcely looked at it, but idling and laughing and talking people turned their backs to the west, to hear the music better, and kept looking instead at one woman as she passed, and murmured to each other in a little flutter: "Dear me! There is Etoile, and the Coronis!" and then reassured each other, and said, "Yes, indeed—oh yes, really—that is Etoile with the Coronis!" in a certain tone of disappointment because she was only like any other well-dressed woman after all, and humanity considers that when genius comes forth in the flesh the touch of the coal from the altar should have left some visible stigmata on the lips it has burned, as, of course anybody knows, it invariably leaves some snirch upon the character.

Humanity feels that genius ought to wear a livery, as Jews and loose women wore yellow in the old golden days of distinction.

"They don't even paint!" said one lady, and felt herself aggrieved.

Nevertheless the lady and all the rest of the crowd continued to look.

Dorotea Coronis they had all of them seen many scores of times through their opera-glasses at Covent Garden, the Grand Opera, and the theatre at Baden; but Etoile they had hardly any of them ever seen, and they stared hard with all the admirable impudence of a well-born mob.

"They don't seem to see us!" said the aggrieved lady who had wondered they did not paint.

"Look deuced proud," muttered an Englishman who had lifted his hat eagerly, and put it on sulkily, being unnoticed.

The carriage swept by again, and both the women in it looked at the sunset, and not at the crowd. The crowd began to feel neglected, and to grow ill-natured. Sovereigns took the trouble to bow: why could not these two whose only royalty was that of art?

"Who is Etoile?" said the crowd.

"An enigma without an *Cædipus*," said one of its items, who thought himself a wit.

"There is no enigma at all, except in your imaginations," said another item, who was old and grave, which was a foolish remark, no doubt, because an enigma that is purely imaginary must be of necessity the most puzzling of all, since it follows as a matter of course that nobody ever can solve it.

The carriage paused, and its occupants bought Parma violets. The crowd was disposed to think there must be some motive for the action, as it eyed dubiously the boarhound trotting behind the carriage, and would fain have believed that his tongue hanging out meant a mystery, and that he broke a commandment in wagging his tail.

It is one of the privileges of celebrity that the person celebrated can never wash his hands or open an umbrella without being accredited with some occult reason for his proceedings.

"Is it really Etoile?" said the crowd. Generally speaking people were disposed to believe that she was not herself, but somebody else.

She did not see them. She had a sad habit of not seeing those who surrounded her. When, recalled to a sense of her negligence, she begged the pardon of others for having overlooked them, she was not readily forgiven. People would rather be insulted than be unperceived.

Her equipage, with its long-tailed Roman horses, went the round of the Pincio, past the cactus and aloes, the water clock

and the kiosques for toys, the music-stands and the garden chairs and the various other embellishments placed here, where Augustus mused, and Cæsar and Pompeius supped.

She gazed at the lovely light, rosy as blown pomegranate leaves, with little puffs of golden cloud upon it, light as a cherub's curls.

"How matchless it is!" she said, with a sigh.

"It is Rome," said Dorotea Coronis.

And for them both, the crowd ceased to exist. They only saw the slow-descending sun.

To be wise in this world one should always be blind to the sunset, but never to the people that bow. The sun, neglected, will not freckle us any more than if we had penned him a thousand sonnets as the lord of light. A man or a woman, slighted, will burn us brown all over with blistering spots of censure indelible as stains of iodine, and deep as wounds of vitriol.

"Is it really Etoile?" said the crowd eagerly, and scarcely looked at the brilliant Gitana-like loveliness of her companion, the great Coronis, because it was familiar, but turned and stared with all the stony-hearted inquisitiveness of Society at the little they could see of the one whom they called Etoile, which was indeed only a heap of silver-fox furs, a pile of violets, a knot of old Flemish lace, and dreaming serious eyes that watched the sunset.

She herself scarcely saw that any crowd was there. This kind of oblivion was usually her deadliest sin, and she was unconscious that she sinned, which made it very much worse. People blew their bubbles, or threw their stones about her, and she never heeded either, though indeed, the stones came so thickly sometimes that she ought in common gratitude to have been flattered: calumny is the homage of our contemporaries, as some South Sea Islanders spit on those they honour.

Popularity has been defined as the privilege of being cheered by the kind of people you would never allow to bow to you.

Fame may be said to be the privilege of being slandered at once by the people who do bow to you, as well as by the people who do not.

"Who is she?" said the crowd on the Pincio.

Nobody there knew at all. So everybody averred they knew for certain. Nobody's story agreed with anybody's else's, but that did not matter at all. The world, like Joseph's father, gives the favourite a coat of many colours which the brethren rend.

"She says herself—" hinted the old grave idler, member of many clubs; but nobody wanted to hear what she said herself. *Pas si bête!* Of course she told a story well and laid on the right colours; nobody had talents like hers for nothing.

The old idler got no listeners, and went away pensively to lean on the parapet. He was so far in the minority as to believe what she said herself; which was quite simple and comparatively uneventful, and, therefore, evidently improbable. If she had said she had new lovers every night, and killed them in a back garden every morning, like the Jewess of the French Regency, people might have believed; there would have been nothing staggeringly and audaciously impossible about that.

The crowd on the Pincio, when the whisper of her name had first run through it, had been alive with admiration and cordiality; but the crowd felt that it had had cold water thrown on its enthusiasm, and so began to hiss, as fire under cold water always does.

"Very clever, indeed," said the crowd. "Oh yes, no doubt. Oh, wonderful, quite wonderful, every one knew that; but who was she? Ah! nobody could tell. Oh yes, indeed, it was quite well known. She was a beggar's brat found on a doorstep; she was a cardinal's daughter; she was a princess's *petite fille*; she was a Rothschild's mistress; she was a Cabinet Minister's craze; she was poor De Morny's daughter; she had been a slave in Circassia; she had been a serf in White Russia; she had been found frozen, with a tambourine in her hand, outside the gates at Vincennes; her father was at the galleys, her mother kept an inn. No, they were both Imperial spies and very rich; no, they were both dead; no, nobody ever said that, they said this. The poor Emperor knew, beyond doubt; and the secret had died with him. She was quite out of society, she was in the highest society; she was not received anywhere, she was received everywhere. Oh, that was not true, but this was. Well, the less said the better."

When the world has decided that the less said the better, it always proceeds directly to say everything in the uttermost abundance that it can possibly think of, and it did so on the Pincio this day at sunset, and asked a variety of questions as well.

"Why had she come?"

"Was she going to remain?"

"Would she go out at all?"

"Would she receive?"

"Would she be received?"

"Would she go the legations?"

"Were those Russian furs?"

"Was that dress Worth's?"

"Why did she stop her horses there, with her back to everybody, where she couldn't hear a note of the music?"

So they chattered in much excitement, gazing at her through their eyeglasses, or from under their parasols.

Nobody there happened to know anything, except that she

had come to Rome from Paris, by Nice and Genoa, the previous night; but there was a general feeling that there was probably something wrong.

Why did she turn the back of her carriage to them and buy Parma violets?

In a little while, as the sun grew into a solemn red ball behind the purple dome, and the shadows became longer, the throng began to go down the great winding stairways towards the square below, where the waters fell from the marble mouths, and the grave sphinxes were couched beneath the drooping boughs.

A lady, wrapped in sealskin, with a sealskin hat set well over her brows, began to move also with the two persons who formed her escort. The trio was composed of Lady Joan Challoner, and her husband and the Prince Ioris.

"Is that Etoile?" said the Lady Joan eagerly, as the carriage dashed past them, and she caught the name spoken by some bystanders.

"Is that reely Etoile, now? Do tell," said a fashionable American of her acquaintance joining her, by name Mrs. Henry V. Clams.

"They say so. I've never seen her myself," answered Lady Joan. "Io, and I, and Mr. Challoner have just been to call on her, but she was out. She has brought me letters."

"Reely, now! How interestin'!" said the fashionable American. "Well, it's a very elegant turn-out, now, aren't it? My word!——"

"You can get anything you like to pay for in Rome," said the Lady Joan with much contempt—she herself was on foot. "I must be civil to her. Voightel begs me to be so, and my father too; I must have her to dinner. Will you come, Mrs. Clams?"

"Oh, thanks, now; that's reel kind!" said Mrs. Henry V. Clams. "I'm dyin' to see her, dyin', and I've got a bet in N'York about the way she wears her hair. But they do say she's so rude, you know; Cyrus C. Butterfield—as works the Saratoga press, you know—wrote to ask her to send him every particular of her life from her baptism upwards, and would you believe it?—her secretary—a female, I believe—sent him back his own letter! There!"

The Lady Joan laughed shortly.

"I should say Cyrus C. Butterfield's inquiries would be particularly inconvenient to *her*! I wonder why on earth she has come to Rome!"

"Is there anything strange in coming to Rome?" said the Prince Ioris in his soft Roman tongue.

"No, of course no; what silly things you say! Only, of course she's got some motive. She's with Coronis too."

"The loveliest woman in Europe," said Mr. Challoner with solemnity and unction.

"Wretched creature," said the Lady Joan.

"My word, now, what's *she* up to?" inquired Mrs. Henry V. Clams with lively interest. "Why, she's Duchess Santorin, aren't she?"

"And the Duke is going to divorce her."

"My! You don't say so!"

"Santorin is very thankless: she has paid his debts again and again," murmured the Prince Ioris.

"Oh, everybody that sings is an angel to you, Io!" said Lady Joan, with some irritation.

"If she's paid his debts, he's paid by the nose! Everybody knows what these professional women always are. I dare say Etoile herself is no better."

"My dear love," said Mr. Challoner with serious reproof, "surely you forget. Would your father ever——"

"My father's an ass where a petticoat's concerned, and he'd swear it had all the virtues inside it if it had only taken his fancy. He makes a great fuss about her; Voightel, too, who believes in nobody, believes in her. It's so queer! I suppose she's only sharper than most people."

"I never heard a word——" began the Prince Ioris.

"Stuff," said the Lady Joan, "there are heaps of stories—hideous stories. And there's no smoke without fire, that's certain. What day shall we ask her to dinner?"

"Well, now, I did read years ago, in our country, that she lived with a stoker as she'd taken a fancy to in the Lyons cars once," said Mrs. Henry V. Clams reflectively, searching into recesses of her memory.

Mr. Challoner and the Prince Ioris laughed outright.

"I never heard of the stoker, but I dare say there are things quite as fishy," said the Lady Joan. "What night shall we fix? Will the sixth suit you, Mrs. Clams?"

They sauntered on by the stone balustrades with the scattered groups, who were all making for the Corso, or walking under the Tempietto, Babuino-way, and who were all more or less talking of Etoile and of Dorotea Coronis.

The groups seldom said anything that was amiable of either, still less seldom anything that was true. But to be thus spoken of at all constitutes what the world calls Fame, and ever since the days of Horace the world has wondered that the objects of it are not more grateful for the distinction of detraction.

"Why do you spit?" says the glowworm.

"Why do you shine?" says the frog.

CHAPTER III.

AT the entrance of the Corso, Mr. Challoner recollected an appointment with a friend; his wife and the Prince Ioris strolled on down the Corso together.

It was the hour when the street was at its fullest and prettiest; the irregular casements were half-lighted, half-dark; the painted and gilded signs swung in the shadows; lamps hung above balconies draped with red; in a church doorway white priests were chanting with torches flickering; at the corners stood great baskets of violets and camellias, rose and white; knots of *pifferari* droned the wild, sad monotonies of the music of the hills; at a quick march a file of *bersaglieri*, with their plumes streaming, were coming up the narrow way as up a mountain pass; horses were trampling, drums were beating loud.

"I wonder how *you* will like Etoile, Io; you always do like queer people!" said the Lady Joan, as they moved down into that picturesque chaos and luminous mingling of the night and day.

Her companion answered with gallant grace, "Whatever she is, she will be only for me—*la terza incomoda!*"

The Lady Joan laughed, well pleased, as she pushed her way through the lively and laughing crowds down to the Palazzo di Venezia. In an angle near the Ripresa dei Barberi, where two streets crossed one another in that populous and convenient locality, there was a small house squeezed between two grim palaces, and known as the Casa Challoner to the society and the tradespeople of Rome.

The Lady Joan climbed the stone stairs of the Casa Challoner with agility, and her companion followed with the accustomed matter-of-course air of a man who returns home.

The house was dusky, there was only one lamp lighted in the anteroom, but she pushed her way safely into a little chamber heavy with the smell of Turkish tobacco, and hung with Turkish stuffs, and fitted with Turkish couches.

On one of the divans the Prince Ioris cast himself a little wearily.

The Lady Joan lit a cigarette, stuck it between her teeth, cast aside her sealskins, and began to look over a pile of letters.

"I wish she hadn't come, bother her!" she muttered. "Here's pages more eulogy from that old Tartar, Voightel. She seems to be perfection. I hate perfect people."

The Prince Ioris stretched himself out, and closed his eyes;

his friend continued her examination of her correspondence. There was ten minutes' silence, only broken by the ticking of a Flemish chime-clock.

At the end of ten minutes Lady Joan looked up impatiently.

"Don't lie there, Io, doing nothing; tell me what we've got for next week, that I may settle this dinner."

He sighed, raised himself, and took out a set of tablets from his pocket.

"You have the English bishop and bishopess to-morrow."

"'Bishopess!' Well, go on."

"The Echéance soirée on the 3rd."

"Can't miss that. Well?"

"You take more English to the Opera on the 4th."

"Après?"

"Fifth, masked ball at the Greek Legation?"

"Sixth, Saturday?"

"Two teas—names English that I cannot pronounce."

"We'll throw over the teas. Sixth will do. Get some cards, and fill 'em up."

He obeyed and went to a little writing-table.

"She's a sensational creature to have," continued his friend; "it's best to have her seen here first, before anybody else takes the cream off it. Whom shall we ask? Clever people they must be, and people that go in for that sort of thing. Ask Lady Cardiff; she won't mind if Etoile does startle the proprieties."

He filled in the card obediently; and she dictated some dozen other names to him, leaning over his shoulder as he wrote.

"Now fill in Etoile's," she said. "I'll send a little note with it, too, to be civil. That old beast Voightel and papa make such a fuss——"

"I cannot put—Etoile on the card?"

"Of course not. You must put Comtesse d'Avesnes. Did ever you hear such rubbish! And papa and Voightel believe in her, title and all."

"Why should they not?" said the writer, as he slid the cards into their envelopes.

The Lady Joan thrust her tongue in her cheek, and jumped a step of the hornpipe.

"As much countess as the cat! Now do draw that triptych that old Norwich wants so—make haste. We dine at seven, you know, because of the theatre. Send Anselmo with the notes to-morrow morning. Etoile's you might leave to-night. She's on your way home. I'll write her note now."

She crossed over to her bureau, and wrote a pretty epistle, which ended:

"Pray kindly waive ceremony, and come to us on Saturday; my dear father and so many of our common friends have spoken so much of you that I cannot even think of you as a stranger,

and my husband will be as glad as I to have the honour of receiving Etoile in our Roman home."

Then she wrote another which began :

"Dearest Voightel,—The hint of a wish of yours is a delight and a command to me; you know how I love and honour all genius, etc. etc."

Then she scampered through half a dozen more letters with the pen of a ready writer; jumped up and crossed over to where her friend sat sketching by the light of a reading-lamp, and ran her fingers through his soft dark hair.

"How slow you are, Io! You've only drawn one wing yet, and I've written fifteen letters."

That night the Prince Ioris, after escorting the Lady Joan to and from the broad fun of the Valle Theatre walked through the white Roman moonlight to his own little ancient palace in the street of the Ripetta, and pausing, as he went, at the Hôtel de Russie, left the Lady Joan's note there for the Comtesse d'Avesnes.

"Etoile; it is a pretty name," he thought to himself; "whose star is she beside her own? A great artist, all the world knows; what else may she be, I wonder?"

Now, to wonder about any woman was a liberty and a luxury forbidden to him.

The key of his very thoughts hung to the girdle of the Lady Joan as she moved, and lay under the pillow of the Lady Joan as she slept—or she believed it did, which satisfied her quite as well.

CHAPTER IV.

Who was Etoile?

The world in general said it as often as the crowd on the Pincio.

They never attended to what she said herself. Nobody wants facts. Facts are hardly more amusing than mathematics. Unless, indeed, they are the kind of facts that you can only just whisper under your breath. And of this kind of facts—the only kind that can in any way be diverting to others—the life of the great Belgian artist remained conspicuously, absurdly, inconsistently, and inconsiderately barren.

The world supplied the deficiency.

The world supplies you with history as our great tailor supplies us with dresses: he surveys our face and figure and selects for us what is appropriate. The world cuts out its gossip on the same judicious lines—whether you like what is given you is of no moment either to Worth or the world: you have got to wear it.

Be thankful that you are Somebody. Neither Worth nor the world would trouble themselves to fit you if you were not.

In the morning, Society that had been on the Pincio read in its papers that Etoile was in Rome on account of her health. Physicians had advised perfect repose and a warmer winter than Paris or Brussels can offer. Society read the paragraph, and putting down the papers wondered what the paragraph was meant to cover. Something, of course. Heaps of things, probably. Health, indeed! What rubbish! Wasn't it a sculptor? No; money! Ah, money? Oh, indeed, much worse than *that*! Exile was *ordered*, quite *ordered* from the Elysée. You understand? Everybody whispered, nodded, seemed to understand, because nobody did understand in the least; and nobody, of course, could endure to look so ignorant.

When a name is on the public mouth the public nostril likes to smell a foulness in it. It likes to think that Byron committed incest; that Milton was a brute; that Raffaele's vices killed him; that Pascal was mad; that Lamartine lived and died a pauper, that Scipio took the treasury moneys; that Thucydides and Phidias stole; that Heloise and Hypatia were but loose women after all—so the gamut runs over twice a thousand years; and Rousseau is at heart the favourite of the world because he was such a beast, with all his talent.

When the world is driven to tears and prayers by Schiller it hugs itself to remember that he could not write a line without the smell of rotten apples near, and that when he died there was not enough money in his desk to pay his burial. They make him smaller, closer, less divine: the apples and the pauper's coffin.

Etoile kept no rotten apples by her, and the world sniffed in vain.

Had she worn men's clothes, travelled with a married duke, and had a caprice for a drunken painter, no doubt the world would have better understood her genius. As it was it felt exasperated, and thought her ostentations.

After all, the innocence of a woman is no amusement whatever to anybody. It only gives nothing to be said about her. In any case, whenever the woman is celebrated, the world will not put up with nothing. It cuts out the garment of her history to its own fancy. It is like the great tailor: it knows better than she does what she ought to wear.

Etoile rose and strolled through the courts and galleries of the Vatican, unconscious, or indifferent, of the babble that went on concerning her.

Society saw her servant and the big dog, Tsar, sitting outside with the Swiss Guard. It was almost inclined to think there must be something wrong with a Cardinal. What a nasty savage-looking creature that dog was!

At noon she went back to her hotel, found a few cards awaiting her, and at two o'clock was seen to be driving with the Princess Vera von Regonwalde, an ambassadress and a wit.

Princess von Regonwalde, or Princess Vera, as her friends called her by her pretty girlish title, was an Austrian by birth, and the wife of a Minister of another great Power, not Austrian. She was one of the loveliest women that ever brightened a court; she had a face like the Cenci, a walk like a young Diana's, a smile like a child's, a grace like a flower's, eyes like a fawn's, fancies like a poet's, and a form that Titian would have given to Venns. She had beautiful children, that clung round her in Correggio-like groups; and she always looked like a picture, whether shining in velvet and cloth of gold in a throne-room, or straying in a linen dress through starlit myrtles on Italian hills. Princess Vera was a great social power; and when Society saw Etoile in her carriage it began to think that probably after all the paragraph was quite true; it began to recollect that it had always heard that this great artist's lungs were not very strong. And what a beautiful dog was the boarhound! Dear fellow, what was his name?

Mrs. Henry V. Clams, on the contrary, as she saw the Regonwalde carriage sweep by, said that it was right-down preposterous, and she didn't care who heard her.

Mrs. Henry V. Clams had passed the years of her youth in a Far West sawmill, in sewing-bees, washing-bees, blackberrying, and chapel-going, in the middle of a clearing, a good five hundred miles from any township; and she had, now that youth was fled from her, bloomed into an *élégante* in Europe, thanks to marvellous dishes, unlimited open house, politic lovers, and her husband's dollars, which were many.

Still, as an *élégante*, Mrs. Henry V. Clams never felt quite sure of her footing, and the night before, on the Pincio, at the sight of Etoile in dusky olive-hued velvet, entirely unornamented, she had had an uneasy conviction that she herself had too many buttons, too many colours, too many fringes, and had a bonnet too much like a firework, and that her Paris deity had been faithless to her, and had arrayed her in raiment only fit for the "half-world," and the feeling rankled in her and made her say, "Preposterous!" snappishly, though she was a good-natured woman in the main.

Mrs. Henry V. Clams' countrywomen are received at all the Courts of Europe with no better qualification, very often, than that nobody *does* know where they come from; and, did any ill-judged inquisitor seek to know, his investigations would very often lead him into many unsavoury dens of the Bowery and drinking-shops of "Frisco," into the shanty of many a ticket-of-leave man and the pawnshop of many a German Jew.

But it is a question that Mrs. Henry V. Clams and her countrywomen are very fond of asking; and, indeed, *à propos* of their own countrywomen, they will always tell you with the utmost frankness that Mrs. Ulysses B. Washington once sold hot potatoes, and Mrs. Heloise W. Dobbs shot her first husband in St. Louis, and Miss Anastasia B. Spyrlé, betrothed to Prince Volterra, danced in tights throughout the States; or any other biographical trifle of the sort, with an impartiality scorning national bias.

"Nobody can't say where sho came from," said Mrs. Henry V. Clams, drawing herself out a glass of Curaçoa from a little barrel of Baccarat glass in her own drawing-room. It was her day to receive.

"Nobody can't say where she came from," reiterated Mrs. Henry V. Clams with a kind of triumph.

"Who wants to know where artists come from? I don't," said Lady Joan Challoner, with a fine sentiment worthy of a great patron of the arts, which she was.

"When they stick to being artists, of course not," said Mrs. Henry V. Clams. "You don't see 'em then, and have no call to speak to 'em; but to think as Princess Vera, who, I'm sure, looks as if angels and empresses weren't good enough to black her shoes——"

"Princess Vera's art-mad," said the Lady Joan. "I love art

myself, as you know, but still there are bounds to everything. Well, anyhow *I* must know her, so I'm glad Princess Vera will keep me in countenance. Io, we ought to be going. What are you looking at there? Oh, a photograph of Etoile."

The Prince Ioris laid aside an album marked *Célébrités*, with a backward glance at the page he had opened it at, where he saw a mere profile like a white cameo on a dark ground, and the letters "Etoile" underneath it.

"Can one buy those portraits, madame? he asked of his hostess as he hastened to follow the Lady Joan.

"Why, my! yes. That one's five francs. I think it's one of Goupil's," said Mrs. Henry V. Clams. "But it isn't much to look at; that one of Judic's, now, or Croisette's——"

But it was not Judic or Croisette that was in his fancy.

"Come along; take Spit," said the Lady Joan, sharply, and threw a small blue Skye dog into his arms as they descended the broad Aubusson-covered staircase of the American's magnificent abode.

"That woman upstairs was quite right; it *is* preposterous," she continued. "But I thought I wouldn't say so, as we must know her now. Where are my furs? Take care."

The Prince Ioris, when in the streets, took advantage of a moment when the Lady Joan was engrossed in a shop in the Condotti, cheapening a piece of china, to go across to Suleipis and order a photograph from Goupil's to be got for him.

The shopman answered with alacrity that he had one already. "In fact, we have several, Excellence. She is here, you know, and that always creates a demand," he said, dropping his voice.

Ioris bought the portrait, and slipped it inside his sable-lined coat.

"Where have you been, Io? I missed you a moment ago," said the Lady Joan angrily, having failed to cheapen the china, and feeling cross accordingly.

"I went to look if it rained. I was afraid you would get wet," he answered simply, and restored the serenity to her brows by buying the bowl for her.

It was a really charming piece of old Nankin.

"Etoile!" He said the word again to himself as he left his friend in her ante-room, happy with her bowl, and went to his own house to dress for dinner. The name had a fascination for him. He looked at the photograph by the light of the lamps as he walked, and when he reached his own house put it away in a secret drawer. He had here and there a secret drawer of which the Lady Joan did not possess the secret.

The subject of his thoughts, and of the portrait, had been called Etoile as long as she could remember; the peasant folks calling her so because in her childhood she ran so fast, and her

long fair hair streamed after her so far, that she looked like a shooting star as she flew by them in the summer nights in green Ardennes.

To the world in general the name seemed strange, suspicious, uncomfortable, indicative of that string of asterisks on a page, which replaces what is too shocking to be printed. But to her it had all the old familiar charm of a sound that bears all childhood in it.

The first thing that she could remember was a sunny village in the woods on the banks of the bright Meuse water, in the heart of that sweet green country of Jaques and Rosalind which, for some things, has no equal upon earth.

Few places on the earth are lovelier than the province through which the bright Meuse wanders, and the first memories of Etoile were of its glancing waters, its wooded hills, its rich grass meadows, its noble forest trees, its gabled houses, grey and black with time, its broad yellow roads, leading westward to France and eastward to the Rhine. There are a breadth, a graciousness, a fresh and fragrant verdure in all this country not to be surpassed in charm; it is unworn and unspoilt; and although under its leafy woods the wheel of the gambler turns, and by its limpid springs the tired hypochondriac drinks, still there is much of it that neither gambler nor hypochondriac ever sees, and that is solitary as Suabian or Pennine Alp, and radiant with a brightness all its own.

The beautiful rapid river, foaming by mill and weir; and the hayfields, with their grand elms and walnuts; and the high hills where the pines grew, and the one little sunny paved street, with the village fountain at the end, where the women gossiped and the big-belled horses drank—these were the first things on which the eyes of Etoile had opened, and made the first pictures that her mind remembered. A brown-frooked monk, a grey-frooked nun, a cowherd with his cattle, a wagon with its team, a group of women with their burden of linen going to the washing-places in the river—these were all that passed up and down the hilly road between the double row of tall bird-filled aspens; the little place was sunny, sleepy, very still, but it was lovely, bosomed deep in fragrant woods, and watered by the Meuse.

And then what a world of wonders lay around!—the primroses, the blue jays, the leaping trout, the passing boats, the foxes that stole out almost familiarly, the squirrel swinging in the nut thickets of the hills, the charcoal-burners coming down rough and black to tell tales of the bears and wolves high up above, the great Flemish cart-horses walking solemnly in state caparison outward on the highroads to France or Prussia, the red lurid glow far away in the evening sky, which told where the iron-blasters of stern, fierce Liége were at work—these were wonders

enough for a thousand years, or at least for a young child to think them so.

Etoile thought so, and her childhood went by like a fairy tale told by a soft voice on a summer day.

The house she lived in was very old, and had those charming conceits, those rich shadows, that depth of shade, that play of light, that variety, and that character which seem given to a dwelling-place in ages when men asked nothing better of their God than to live where their fathers had lived, and leave the old roost to their children's children.

The thing built yesterday, is a caravanserai: I lodge in it to-day, and you to-morrow; in an old house only can be made a home, where the blessings of the dead have rested and the memories of perfect faiths and lofty passions still abide.

This house stood in a green old shady garden, and at the end of the garden the trees hung over the beautiful river. Etoile used to think that in just such a garden must have passed the long slumbers of the Sleeping Beauty. All happy childhood is like an April morning, but hers was beyond most children's happy by reason of its simplicity, its unclouded peace, and the fair, gay, shapeless dreams that were with it always like light golden clouds about the sun.

There were sadness and mystery near, but neither were allowed to touch her. She only knew peace and joy. If she had been told that she had dropped from the stars on a mid-summer night she would have believed it quite easily: no healthy child's life will ever wonder whence it comes or whither it drifts. It is enough for it that it *is*.

This is the one felicity that the innocence of infancy and the trance of passion share in common. The immediate moment is the heaven alike of the child and of the lover.

She was very happy always in this, her green birth-country, by the river-side.

But she was never happier than when she went out of the sweet summer sunshine, from the murmur of the street fountain, and from the smell of the blossoming orchards into the quiet dusky den that was her study, and bent her curls over the ponderous tomes and the intricate exercises with which her tutors delighted in trying her patience and her powers.

Out of doors she was the merest child, happy in all a child's pleasure of new-born days, and new-found berries, and new-made cakes, of the old swing in the sycamore, and the first swallow, that showed summer, and the promise of a long day in the woods to bring home violets, or any other of the many simple things which made her childhood beautiful.

She knew the whereabouts of every rare wild flower; she knew every bird that haunted the woods or the streams; she was friends with all the peasant folk, and would find their stray

sheep for them and tame the dogs they were afraid of; she loved the wind and the wild weather as she loved the heat that uncurled the carnation-buds, and the still moonshine when the nightingales sang in the orchards; she was not dismayed if evening fell as she ran alone down a lone hill-side, or if she bore down through the swift wild rain like a little white boat through a surging sea; she had the love of nature of a German and the unconsciousness that she loved it of a Greek.

"*Tu es folle*," said her old teacher to her because she laughed and cried for joy to see the first primrose break out of the bleak brown earth, and kneeled down and kissed the flower, and told it how glad the birds would be, and would not to have saved her life have taken it away from its shelter of green leaves. "*Tu es folle*," said the old teacher—it is what the world always says to the poet.

In the forests on the Meuse river there lived an old man who did not tell her she was foolish. He was a German, who had been a noted artist in his day, until paralysis of his right arm by some accident had put an end to his career and his hopes of fame. He was sad and alone; was harsh of temper and taciturn; but he took a fancy to this child who was always out of doors trying to learn the secrets of the clouds' movements and the waters' hues, and he guided aright her passionate instincts towards the arts. By the time she was fifteen she had created things that the old master thought more marvellous than he would confess to her. She painted all the day in the open air, on the hills and by the torrents; she studied all the evenings and half the night. She was perfectly happy.

There was another world, of course, where the hay-wagons went and the barges down the river; but she wanted no other.

Now and then there would come to the black-and-white house on the river a person for whom the ways of the house were changed, and who was always whispered of in words of awe by the village people. He would kiss her carelessly, bid her do a problem or write a poem, stay a few days, and go. She was told that he was her father—the Count Raoul d'Avesnes.

In the old fighting days the Counts d'Avesnes had been a fierce and mighty race, reigning in lofty regions of the wild Ardennes, Catholics always, and warriors rather than courtiers. Little by little, in strife and conspiracy, and internecine wars, they had lost their lands and greatness, until little save their traditions were left in modern times. This, their sole living representative, was a man of many ambitions, of no achievement. A political gamester, a political conspirator, his life was spent in the treacherous seas of political intrigue, and he at the last perished in their whirlpool. Little was known of him—by his daughter almost nothing. He had broken his wife's heart and spent her money. His own death was mysterious, like his life. He passed away and made no sign.

There is so much mystery in this world, only people who lead humdrum lives will not believe it.

It is a great misfortune to be born to a romantic history. The humdrum always think that you are lying. In real truth romance is common in life, commoner, perhaps, than the commonplace. But the commonplace always looks more natural.

In nature there are millions of gorgeous hues to a scarcity of neutral tints; yet the pictures that are painted in sombre semi-tones and have no one positive colour in them are always pronounced the nearest to nature. When a painter sets his palette, he dares not approach the gold of the sunset and dawn or the flame of the pomegranate and poppy. Etoile's short story had this gold and red in it, and so no one believed in it any more than they do in the life-likeness of Turner's *Hesperides*.

She, a happy and thoughtful child, lived in the little Ardennes village with her mother's mother, and her two old servants, and knew nothing of all this heritage of wonder and of woe. Occasionally the wonderful person who was called her father came and brought a wonderful breath of the outer air with him. That was all she knew.

One day his shadow passed for the last time up the sunny street between the aisles of aspen and was seen no more there ever after, and his letters ceased, and silence fell upon his fate; and in time they came to know that he was dead and she was the last that lived of the once famous race of the Counts d'Avesnes.

It scarcely seemed strange to her—she had always known so little.

He had been a black bead in the golden rosary of her happy childhood; she barely missed it when it dropped.

In after-years people would never believe that Etoile, beyond the fact of the patrician name she bore, had known so little; they forgot how completely natural and matter of course the strangest circumstances seem to one who has been rocked in them, as it were, in a cradle from birth upward.

Her father had come and gone, come and gone, as comets do. He ceased to come; it did not seem strange.

She studied in the big books, and strayed about in the chestnut woods and orchards, and lived in her own fancies more than in anything around her. Vague desires would oftentimes touch her, as she used to stand on the brow of the reaped fields, and watch the sun go down, red and beautiful against the dusky masses of the far-off woods. But they were desires whose wings were still folded; like those of fledgling birds, that flutter a little way through the green leaves, and then are frightened at their dreams of flight.

For the rest, her grandmother and the old servants took all

care of things bodily and temporal. Etoile was free to think and dream and study.

The treasures of scholarship are sweet to all who open them. But they are perhaps sweetest of all to a girl that has been led both by habit and by nature to seek them.

The soul of a girl whilst passions sleep, desires are unknown, and self-consciousness lies unawakened, can lose itself in the impersonal as no male student can. The mightiness and beauty of past ages become wonderful and all-sufficient to it, as they can never do to a youth beset by the stinging fires of impending manhood. The very element of faith and of imagination, hereafter its weakness, becomes the strength of the girl-scholar. The very abandonment of self, which later on will fling her to Sappho's death, or mure her in the cell of Heloise, will make her find a cloudless and all-absorbing happiness in the meditations of great minds, in the myths of heroic ages, in the delicate intricacies of language, and in the immeasurable majesties of thought. The evil inseparable from all knowledge will pass by her unfelt; the greatness only attainable by knowledge will lend her perfect and abiding joys.

Whilst they were only scholars be sure that Sappho and Heloise were calmer and more glad than any other women; it was when they looked up from the written page to the human face that their woes surpassed all others'—because beyond all others' was their loss.

A year after the tidings of the Comte d'Avesnes' death had come to the Ardennes, her grandmother, reflecting that at her death the child would be solitary, with a slender patrimony and a name whose past nobility was of no present use, resolved to sacrifice her own peace and move to a great city.

They went to Paris, leaving the green Meuse waters and those bright woodland villages that lie out of the beaten track and are so still and fresh and charming. Etoile sobbed bitterly: yet she was full of ecstatic wonder and hope. She forgot that thousands have had such hope before her, and had only perished miserably in the vast press of life. If youth did not thus forget, maturity would have no fame to record.

They made their home in a nook of old Paris within sight of the trees of the Luxembourg. A tumult of great ideas and vague ambitions was in the mind of the child who had studied more than many men, and had the poetry of many nations all alive within her.

In the city of pleasure Etoile uninterruptedly pursued both art and study. Friends they had but few; those few were of the proud impoverished families of a nobility that had nothing left except its traditions of honour; and such as these thought the pursuit of art a degradation.

One day Etoile, however, made a friend of her own. Chances

brought her across the path of an old man whose name was very glorious to her: a great master whose genius had been nurtured amidst the mighty storms of the First Empire. The old man looked long in silence at her, the harsh lines of his face softening and changing; then he turned to her and uncovered his white head.

"My sun has long set," he said; "I rejoice to see yours rise."

The word of David Istrion was still a law in Paris and all the worlds of art. He kept her secret and sent her first picture to the Salon himself.

"One of my pupils," was all he would say when questioned as to the painter.

The picture was only the study of a gleaner returning by sunset over naked fields; but it had an instant and unquestioned success. It was followed by greater and stronger works signed "Etoile."

The pictures were for some few years always thought to be the creations of a man, were treated as such; and when the rumour was first current that the painter was a woman—a girl—the great world of Paris laughed aloud in derision and utter disbelief.

Their force, their depth of tone, their anatomical accuracy, and above all their profound melancholy, made it impossible—so they said.

Nevertheless the world, which has lived to see many impossible things pass into the limbo of incontestable facts, lived to see this pass also.

"It is time they should know the truth," said David Istrion, and told it. Etoile regretted that it should be told: to the pure ambitions of the true artist creation is paradise, but the praise of the crowd seems profanity.

But David Istrion had not had his own way unresisted for two thirds of a century to consider such a trifle as any one's personal desires.

He made the truth known; and within a year or two, she sprang at once into the fierce light that beats upon a throne—the contested and bitterly begrudged throne of genius.

David Istrion lived long enough to see her triumphs—not long enough to protect her from the dark shadows that slink in the path of all triumphs. Etoile became a name on the tongues of all Paris, and so on all the tongues of the world. She had a fame as great and as pure as is possible in this age, when fame is too often awarded by the mere screams of the vulgar. To her house, in the Paris winters, came many of the greatest men of her time. She influenced them much more than they influenced her. She had a life that was brilliant and rich in all fruits of the intellect.

As recreations of her leisure she wrote a comedy in verse

which had a tumultuous success on a great stage, and some poems were printed in great reviews, all signed "Etoile." "She has all the talents," said the world angrily. If she had only had all the vices too the world would not, perhaps, have minded so much.

Unfortunately for her reputation, no one could find out that she had as much as one vice. Few women could boast of being her friend, but no man could boast of being her lover.

Ten years now had gone by since she left the Meuse river; they had been ten years of brilliancy if not of happiness. Genius is seldom happy—except in its dreams or the first hours of its love.

With a woman, the vulgarity that lies in public adulation is apt to nauseate; at least if she be so little of a woman that she is not vain, and so much of one that she cares for privacy. For the fame of our age is not glory but notoriety; and notoriety is to a woman like the bull to Pasiphaë—whilst it caresses it crushes.

Fame brought Etoile its sweet and bitter fruits together.

"That is Etoile," said every one when she passed by. People who creep by in obscurity think this notice from mankind must be paradise.

All at once she grew tired of the brilliant success that surrounded her; it seemed tame, stupid, a twice-told tale. "Oh! old world, have you nothing better?" she said thanklessly to the world which had been too prodigal of its laurels to her.

She lost zest in it all. A cough settled on her lungs. When her physicians bade her rest and go to Italy she was glad.

They said she had caught cold from working in clay. She had had that desire to create something excellent in sculpture which comes to most true painters; but her malady was not due to cold or clay; it was rather the fatal revenge entailed on any mortal who has exiled the passions and the affections, and who will sicken for them unconsciously; the most splendid structure of the intellect will always have this danger at its base.

CHAPTER V.

On the night when the Prince Ioris took the little three-cornered note of his friend to the Comtesse d'Avesnes the note was carried upstairs to a large *salon* on the first floor, of which the windows were standing open, giving to view the masses of trees on the Pincio and the Medici gardens and the brilliant stars of a winter's night. The naked and tawdry splendour of an hotel apartment was redeemed by masses of flowers that the present occupants of it had brought there—pale violets, snowy camellias, and early narcissi, born under glass, and showing their tender heads coyly, as if cold.

Against one of the open casements leaned Etoile, wrapped in her furs—for the night was chilly—looking at the stars of Orion, which had arisen above the dark lines of the ilex trees, and listening to the fall of the fountain water in the square below.

She was fair of skin, and in form slender and supple, from living much out of doors and taking much exercise in the saddle and on foot; she had bright-hued hair that was lifted a little from her forehead, and eyes like the eyes of the boyish portrait of Shelley; her velvet skirts fell to her feet in the simple undulating folds that Leonardo da Vinci loved to draw. People were vaguely disappointed when they saw her; they would have liked her better in a man's coat, with her hair cut short, and generally odd and untidy-looking. An artist that you might by accident mistake for a duchess is annoying.

"What are you thinking of, Etoile?" said her companion, who was that wonderfully beautiful woman, brilliant as a pomegranate flower or a sapphire, who was at once Dorotea Coronis and the wife of the Duc de Santorin.

"I believe I was thinking of Actea."

From the hotel she could see the dark masses of the trees on the Pincio, and the round dome of the church raised to lay the unholy spirit of Nero to rest.

"Poor Actea! The slave-girl redeems the age she lived in——"

"Rich Actea! happy Actea!" said Dorotea Coronis, with a sigh. "Her beast was god to her. She never saw him as he was. No doubt she thought him, too, a great artist and a perfect poet. Love is blind."

"Not the highest love, surely."

"What do you know about it? You love nothing but your art."

"That is Voightel's complaint."

"Voightel is quite right. Why have you never cared for any man, Etoile?"

"Cared? Men are so admirable as friends; when they speak of warmer things than friendship they weary or they revolt me; I lose my regard for them and my patience with them. It is hard to give a reason for these things."

"You are fortunate to be so cold."

"Is it coldness? And is it fortunate? I am not so certain."

"Whatever it is, it makes you many foes. You seem to say to men, 'You are too stupid to succeed,' and to women, 'I am stronger than you.'"

"I do not mean to say anything of the kind. It is true most people tire me. There is so little profundity in them, and one reads them so soon. A new acquaintance is like a new novel: you open it with expectation, but what you find there seldom makes you care to take it off the shelf a second time."

"I am glad I am an old friend."

Etoile smiled.

"Oh! old friends are our Homers and Horaces, our Shakespeares and Molières: we cannot read them too often, and we find something in them to suit all our moods. Why will you go away from me, dear Dorotea?"

The Duchesse Santorin laughed a little wearily.

"My dear! when M. le Duc must have two hundred thousand francs as his New Year's *étrennes*! You forget I am not my own mistress, and the Petersburg engagement was signed this time last year."

"I would give him no more. Surely your marriage contract protects you a little?"

"Entirely. But only so can I purchase his absence. He has outraged me in every kind of way, but he has not lost his legal rights. He never struck me before witnesses; and though he had mistresses all over Europe he did not bring one under the same roof with me. You see he is blameless."

The lovely dark face of the great Spanish singer grew weary and full of scorn; she rose and walked to and fro the room restlessly.

"I wish you were not going to Russia," said her friend, in a low tone, leaving the open window.

The Duchesse Santorin looked up quickly and paused in her rapid and passionate walk.

"You think I shall meet Fédor. You mistake. He has left the Imperial Guard and had himself ordered to the Caucasus by my wish. He is there, and he will be there all winter."

"But who will believe that?"

"It does not matter what is believed. It matters what *is*."

"To ourselves and the God we hope for—yes."

"And what else matters? When we are 'in the light that beats upon a throne' we are at once condemned unheard—for Envy and Mediocrity sit on the judgment-seat, and whenever did they wait for truth?"

In brave old Cordova, twenty years before, a tiny child with some gitaña blood in her had danced the *zaronga* with twinkling feet whenever a castanet clicked or a tambourine sounded—a child so beautiful that when her father, a picador, lay dying in the sand of the bull-ring he kissed her on the eyes and said, "Though I go where I shall see the faces of the children of God, there will be no face so fair amongst them as my Dorotea's."

She was only five years old then, but she never afterwards forgot the circle of sand, the stream of blood, the sea of faces, the great dead bull, the dying man whose last breath was a kiss to her.

His brethren of the tribe, unasked, took the burden of her, shared between them the cost of her small wants, and housed her safely with good women, and even had her well taught by a priest; or taught, at least, as much as it is ever thought a Spanish girl can want to know apart from her lore of fan and rosary. The little Dorotea danced in every *patio* where the guitar was sounding, and sang in every church where the litanies were chaunting—a wild, gay, most lovely child; proud, too—so proud that the Cordovans would say to one another that perhaps the fables were true which had given to the picador the blood of an old kingly stock.

When she was growing a little out of childhood some one travelling through Cordova chanced to see and hear her sing.

The traveller was an old Jew whose errand in life was to find great singers for great theatres. He was an honest man and virtuous, though he loved money. He persuaded her protectors to sell him the little Dorotea. He took her away with him, and dealt gently with her, training her wonderful powers aright, and letting her know and hear nothing to her hurt. At sixteen she sang in Italy, at seventeen in Paris. She had one of the purest voices that had been ever heard upon the stage, and her marvellous beauty and brilliancy made her fame even more than her voice. Dorotea Coronis was one of the wonders of the world. She had reached as great heights of perfection as any singer can, and every note that fell from her lovely lips brought a shower of gold.

Amongst her countless lovers came the Duc de Santorin, *Pair de France*, with his heart and his *couronne* in his hand, to lay at her feet. For it was well known that, to be won, she must be wooed, with due honour. After some reluctance and long refusal she became his wife. His passion for herself was hot but brief; his passion for her golden harvests lasted.

The pride in her which the people of Cordova had seen in the

baby dancing the *zaronga* in their courts and gardens made the dignity and ancientness of his name allure her. She had no love for him, but neither had she any dislike. Those about her urged and persuaded her.

"I do not care for you, but you never shall be ashamed of me," she said to him.

He swore gratitude and devotion. He did not keep his word, but she kept hers.

She had now been Duchesse de Santorin for some years, singing in all the cities of Europe to supply his demands, and with a right to a *tubouret* at the Court of France whenever Court of France there might be. The contrast sometimes made her laugh as she had used to laugh above her tambourine in the *patios* of old Cordova, only not with the same mirth. For five years they had been virtually separated, though still nominally of good accord. She had kept her word to him—she had been faithful. But of course the world did not think so.

Men were in love with her wherever her beautiful gazelle-like eyes rested, wherever her pure lark-like voice penetrated. The world knew very well that some of these—oh, yes, of course—and the world was inclined to pity the Duc de Santorin.

"She was a gitaña, you know, a gipsy; a little bare-legged, brazen thing, telling fortunes and rolling in the mud," said the world feminine, jealous of that sovereign grace and that incomparable art which Heaven had given to Dorotea Coronis.

Meanwhile there were many who loved and honoured her, and amongst them was Etoile.

They had become friends at the house of a famous Minister one night in Paris, after a representation of the "*Flauto Mágico*," and their friendship had endured.

"But the Caucasus," said Etoile this evening, "the Caucasus is not so very far that men cannot come back from it. Are you sure that Count Souroff—"

"Will do what I wish him? Yes."

"No; I meant rather you of your own strength. When you are in his own country, when you know him amidst a half-savage people, in sickness and peril, wounded even, perhaps;—can you be sure that you will not yourself recall him?"

"Yes, I am sure. Because my resolve is for his sake, not my own. Listen, Etoile."

She paused in her feverish movements to and fro the great chamber, and stood before her friend.

"A woman who thinks for herself is weak, but the woman who thinks for another is strong. I will not let Fédor Souroff be my lover because I adore him with all my heart, all my soul, all my life. I am a Spanish woman if I am anything; I have fire, not water, in my veins; I have no duties towards my husband, because he has insulted me, robbed me, outraged me, beaten me,

and told me a hundred times a year that I am only his bank, which he honours only too much by plunging his hand into it to seize its gold; only his mechanical nightingale, of which he keeps the key, with the title to wind it up and set it singing when he wills; or break it if it fail to sing. And yet—yet I will not be what they say I am to the man whom I worship, and who thinks holy the very stones or sand that feel my feet, and gives to me the noblest, tenderest, most loyal love that was ever given to a woman, for her joy and pain. I will not—for his sake——”

“For his?”

“For his. You have seen him so little, else you would know why without asking. In the first place, Santorin would shoot him dead. Santorin is base, but not so base as to sink to the *cocu content* of the modern world;—and Fédor would let Santorin shoot him. That would be what he would call only just. But this is the least thing. Fédor would gladly die so to purchase one hour with me. What would be far worse for him would be to live. What man is more wretched on earth than the bond slave of another man’s wife. Fédor is young; he has a great name; he comes of a great family, who adore him; he is a fearless and devoted soldier. I will not ruin him—I will not. He would break his career for me; he would incur exile, confiscation, even the shame of a deserter for me; yes, and adore me the more because I doomed him to them. I will not take his sacrifice. My love, my love!—he is but mortal. He will not love for ever thus; not when love is but another name for disappointment. Men are not like us. In time he will forget me; he will be free; he will be happy.”

She ceased suddenly; a convulsion of violent weeping passed through her; she threw herself prostrate on a couch and buried her beautiful head in her hands.

Etoile looked at her with tears in her own eyes; she forbore to speak; she knew that all the passionate, proud, and vehement nature of Dorotea Coronis was centred in this great passion, whose temptations it yet had strength to resist.

The windows were open and the stars shone in the dark; the sound of the fountains below came on the silence with the dull rumbling of the night traffic of Rome; the air was sweet and heavy with the smell of forced heliotrope with which they had filled a large bowl on a marble table.

“To love like that!” thought Etoile. “It must be worth even all that pain.”

And for the first time in her life she felt solitary.

At that moment the servant brought her the note from the Casa Challoner and a bouquet of white flowers, lilies of the valley and narcissi, which the Prince Ioris had purchased in the flower-shop of the Via Condotti as he passed in the moonlight, and sent

up with his own card, on one of those unthinking impulses which sometimes imperilled all his prudence.

"What sweet lilies!" said Etoile, and forsook the stars for them, bending her face over their fragrance. Flowers were her earliest loves, and had never been displaced in her affections. Then she opened the Lady Joan's letter.

A few evenings before, in Paris, Voightel, shrewdest, keenest, and most merciless of wits and men, had been with her to bid her farewell.

"Go and see Archie's daughter, since he wishes it; go and see my Lady Joan," had said the great Voightel—traveller, philologist, past-master in all sciences and all tongues, standing on her hearth, and glowering through his green spectacles, and his grizzled beard, till he looked like a magnified and cynical tom-cat. "I have often talked to Joan of you. What is she like? Not a whit like Archie, but a handsome woman, and a clever woman in her way, which is not your way. Mérimée calls her his *pétroleuse*. It is inexact. *Pétroleuses* burn with no idea of ultimate booty: she would never waste her oil so. Cleopatra crossed with Dame du Comptoir were nearer, I think. I admire her very much. I always know she is lying, and yet I am always pleased when she lies to please me. How contemptible! But all men are weak. I am inclined to respect women who *live* every hour of their lives. She does. You do not. You dream too much ever to live very vividly, unless you ever fall in love. I do so wish you would. It would make you so many friends. Men dislike a woman who will not be wooed. Believe that, my disdainful Etoile, who will be wooed by nobody. When a woman is 'kind' to various men, each favoured mortal is bound, in honour, to arm *cap-à-pie* and swear she never was 'kind' to anybody. Whereas, when she repulses and rebuffs them all round as you do, her lovers become her enemies, and will be more than human if they do not take her character away, out of the sincerity of their conviction that somebody must have been beforehand with them. Reasoning by analogy, I have very little doubt that Faustina was a wife of remarkable purity, and St. Agnes and Agatha very little better than they should have been. Go and see our dear Joan. She is a faggot of contradictions; extraordinarily ignorant, but naturally intelligent; audacious, yet timid; a bully, but a coward; full of hot passions, but with cold fits of prudence. Had she your talent the world would have heard of her. As it is, she only enjoys herself. Perhaps the better part. Fame is a cone of smoke. Enjoyment is a loaf of sugar. I am not sure what she is doing in Rome, but I am quite sure she is in mischief, and quite sure she is making money. When the moon on the Forum has filled your brain with *schwärmerei*, go and see Joan. She is an admirable tonic for all poets. She will be the Prose of Rome for you. You will want prose there."

CHAPTER VI.

At eight o'clock on the sixth of December, Etoile, Comtesse d'Avesnes, went up the many stairs of the Casa Challoner, to see for the first time the woman who was to be to her the Prose of Rome.

She herself was tired, and had little colour; she wore no jewels and had only a knot of pale yellow tea-roses at her breast; her dress trailed softly, it was made up of black Chantilly laces and pale maize hues, and the deftest hands of Paris had cast the easy and simple grace of it together.

She went carelessly, indifferently, wondering if she should like these people as much as she liked Lord Archie; went to her fate as every one does, unwitting that in the commonplace passage of the hours Destiny was striking.

As she entered the ante-room, and laid aside her furs, she heard a voice singing a *ritornello* of the Roman populace, to the deep duple chords of a mandoline.

As her name was announced the voice ceased, and from between two curtains of Oriental silk, that shaded the inner doorway, there advanced, with outstretched hands, the singer, clad in black velvet, with a little collar of diamond stars at her throat, which sparkled as she moved. She had a classic head, fitly shaped for a bust of Athene, an Egyptian profile, brilliant eyes, green by day, black by night, thick eyebrows, and a cordial smile, that showed very white and even teeth.

"How charmed I am! At last we meet! How many many times I have tried to see you in Paris and Brussels!" cried the Lady Joan, with eager welcome, and with honest warmth.

"Your father's daughter can be nothing but my friend," answered her new acquaintance, with sincerity.

Lady Joan, her guitar still in one hand, led her guest with animated and eager compliment to the hearth; pushed a low chair nearer the wood fire, said some pretty words of her own father, and of their dear old Voightel, asked after other friends they had in common, spoke of the weather, and then, as by a mere careless after-thought, or accident, turned suddenly and presented a person who had all the while been standing close by, erect, calm, and unnoticed, like a lord in waiting beside a throne.

"Prince Ioris—the Comtesse d'Avesnes. Ioris is a great friend of my husband's, his dearest friend, indeed. Oh, of course, he has heard of *you*. Who has not? Only, of course,

too, he knows you best as Etoile. We all do that. It is such a charming name!"

The Prince Ioris looked like a picture, and bowed like a courtier, and, leaning his arm on the mantelshelf, began to speak graceful nothings, in his melodious voice.

At that moment there entered, a little hurriedly, like an actor not on the stage in time for his cue, the gentleman with the Scotch face and the German manner, whom Lady Joan, with a little frown on her darkling brows, presented as Mr. Challoner.

Mr. Challoner, the excellence of whose countenance was its unalterability under all circumstances whatever, stared through his eye-glass, bent himself stiffly, and in solemn phrase assured his guest of the supreme honour that he felt she had done to his threshold.

Immediately upon him there followed another of his guests, Mrs. Henry V. Clams, gorgeous in a gown that imprisoned her so tightly that it only permitted of the garb of a circus rider underneath it, and weighty with a perfect Golconda of rubies.

"No stones on her!—my word, and she must have got lots!" reflected Mrs. Henry V. Clams, staring at the tea-roses of Etoile, and settling in her own mind that artists were the most disappointin' people to look at, except princes, that ever she saw.

She was accompanied by the Marquis de Fontebranda, a Piedmontese about the Court, a fair, graceful, and good-looking man, who had trained her in the way she should go, and still suffered many things from her love of colours and her need of dictionaries. Her husband had been invited, of course, but it was understood everywhere that he never came anywhere; he had always a cold, or letters in from N'York. Fontebranda had trained him as well.

The other guests arrived—an English Chief Justice, famous for his wit; a lady known to all Europe as the Marchioness of Cardiff, some Italians, some Russians; finally, a mature pet of the Lady Joan's, a white-haired and cosmopolitan Englishman, by name Silverly Bell, who was a most popular person at all the English tea-parties of the Continent, for nobody sugared your tea more prettily, or told you nastier stories of your neighbours more sweetly.

Dinner announced, Fontebranda was allotted to Etoile, Mr. Challoner offered his arm to Lady Cardiff, and the hostess went in with Mr. Challoner's dearest friend.

"What do you think of her, Io?" she murmured in his ear.

"*Pas grand' chose!*" he murmured back indifferently, with a little shrug of his shoulders.

The Lady Joan's grey-green eyes sparkled happily. She believed him.

The dinner was well appointed, quiet, and unpretentious; the dishes were not too numerous, and were all good; the

flowers were in old Faenza bowls ; the china was old white and gold Ginori, the glass Venetian, the fruit superb. All went well, and there was only one discord, the voice of Mrs. Henry V. Clams, but that is a kind of discord which in the present construction of society is to be heard everywhere, from mountain-tops to throne-rooms.

Mrs. Henry V. Clams thought again and again what "disappointin' people" artists were.

Etoile chanced to say very little.

Sometimes in society she was very silent, sometimes very eloquent. Minds like hers resemble running brooks : they reflect what they pass through ; they are still or sparkling, dark or radiant, according as they flow over sand or moss, under black cloud or sunny sky : the brook is always the same ; it is what it mirrors that varies.

Mrs. Henry V. Clams—who herself was quite independent of circumstances or surroundings, and whose torrents of questions and bubbles of curiosity and chatter never ceased on any occasion, and never had been known to cease, except once at a Drawing-room in London, and once at a total eclipse of the sun, on both of which occasions she had owned to being "that cowed she was right down mum"—stared at Etoile across the table, and said to her next neighbour that "surely there was nothing like clever people for being daft."

Her neighbour being the English Chief Justice, a very clever and merry person himself, assented heartily to the proposition, but begged her to reflect.

"My dear lady, if talent weren't a little daft as you say, how on earth would the great majority ever be got to stand it at all? Consider the enormous utility of genius looking now and then like a fool."

Mrs. Henry V. Clams stuffed her mouth with a *bouchée*, and smiled vaguely. She did not understand, and Fontebranda was too far off to be telegraphed to for explanations.

"If that *be* Etoile, why don't she talk and amuse us?" mused meanwhile, like Mrs. Henry V. Clams, a very different person, the Marchioness of Cardiff, whose heart and soul had been bequeathed to her unaltered from an ancestress of the days of Louis XIV., and who never could see why artists wanted Christian burial, or were asked to dinner, or any of that sort of thing.

"Is that really Etoile, did you say? *the* Etoile, you know?" she asked of her host.

"Yes, yes," assented Mr. Challoner, not being certain whether he ought to be very triumphant over his guest, or somewhat ashamed of her. "Dear Lord Archie is fond of her—begged us to do what we could—you know his good nature—my wife inherits it. Dear Lady Cardiff, do try these larded quails."

"She looks a much better bred one than you do, my dear

sir," thought her ladyship, withdrawing her eyeglass from Etoile to the quails.

"You said you liked to meet celebrities—that it amused you," said her host with an accent of apology in his voice. "Of course, of her great genius there can be no question."

"Of course, of course! and I am charmed," said her ladyship, occupied with her first mouthful of a larded quail. "Tell her to come to my Mondays. I'll tell her myself after dinner. She's very well dressed. Is it Worth?"

"Most likely; she is said to be extravagant."

"I am sure she has a right to be; how nice it must be to make your own money, and spend it, and never be bothered with trustees! Oh yes, Worth, beyond any doubt. The way he ties a bow one never can mistake. And just that tea-rose too—very pretty, very pretty indeed. What different things he gives people he likes, to what he will do for mere millionaires like our dear Mrs. Henry V. Clams."

Etoile, unconscious of the criticism, ruffled the tea-roses amongst her old lace, divided her few words between Fontebranda and a Count Serge Roublezoff who sat on the other side of her, looked often at her hostess, whose bright eyes flashed back honest kindly smiles to hers, and, without knowing very well why she did so, watched the man whom Lady Joan had installed in the seat of honour.

He was very tall and slender, with that look of distinction which, though not always attendant on a great race, is never found outside it; he had high delicate features, and an oval beardless face, a soft olive skin, thoughtful pensive brows, and those eyes which at once allure and command women; he had a beautiful voice, infinite grace and softness of manner, and in aspect might have stepped down off any canvas of Velasquez or Vandyke. Etoile noticed that he was scrupulously alive to every want of the Lady Joan's; he bowed his head in resigned silence whenever she contradicted him, which she did twice in every five minutes; he called her Madame with the strictest ceremony, and addressed Mr. Challoner across the length of the table as "*mon cher*," with more friendly effusion than seemed needful, on more occasions than were natural. Occasionally he looked across at Etoile herself.

His eyes were thoughtful, dreamy, when he chose, absolutely unrevealing; they had the drooped languid amorous lids and the long dark lashes of his country. Wherever his eyes lighted, Lady Joan's followed and lighted too.

As he looked he was thinking, as long afterwards he told Etoile—

"That woman is half a saint and half a muse.

"She has never loved.

"She is full of idealities.

"She has strong passions, but they sleep.

"Her dreams are the enemies of men.

"She does not care for the world.

"She has been used to her own way, and she has treated all men with indifference; some few with friendship; none with tenderness.

"She seems cold; but I think she is only uninterested.

"She is all mind. Her senses have never stirred. She does not belong to our world.

"She has thoughts that go far away from us.

"She has not enough frivolity to enjoy her own generation.

"She has lovely eyes: they say so much without knowing that they say anything.

"She has beautiful hands.

"She is dressed perfectly.

"I shall detest her.

"Or I shall adore her.

"Which of the two? I do not know.

"Perhaps both."

So he thought of Etoile, watching her across the table whilst he talked with polite attention to his hostess, who snapped him short with her curt, sharp, bright humour, and seldom allowed him to finish a sentence.

He looked very much like a grave slender deerhound held down under a keeper's leash.

There was pride in his eyes and high spirit on his aquiline features, but at the table of the Challoners he was subdued and silent; or at other moments over-assiduous to please. Etoile noticed this; and wondered what relation he bore to them. She gathered from what was said by him and to him that he was a noble of Rome; a courtier; and the owner of an estate to which they constantly referred as Fiordelisa, but which seemed by some inexplicable arrangement to be the Lady Joan's property also.

"What beautiful grapes!" the Chief Justice chanced to say, "finest where all are fine. They are your own growth?"

The Lady Joan nodded assent.

"Yes; they're all off my vines—down at Fiordelisa."

"You like grapes, Madame?" said Ioris to Etoile, who was opposite him. "Oh! you must allow me to send you some—from Fiordelisa."

"What is Fiordelisa?" thought Etoile. She did not know that, although Fiordelisa was the property of Ioris, Ioris was still more absolutely the property of the Lady Joan.

"What a pretty name Fiordelisa!" she hazarded as she thanked him.

Lady Joan interrupted his reply.

"Yes; it was a beastly old barrack when we went in it: but

we have done no end to improve it inside and out," said the hostess, cracking a walnut.

Etoile fancied that the face of the Roman Prince grew a shade paler still, as with anger, but she thought it might be only her fancy; all artists are fanciful. He drew a flower out of one of the bowls near him, and busied himself fastening it into his buttonhole.

Dinner over, they sauntered into one of the three or four little salons of the house; a little room with Smyrna carpets and comfortable couches, and a great many pictures, and a great deal of china. Here the Lady Joan opened her cigar-case, threw herself back at ease, and expressed her hope that everybody smoked.

Everybody did, except Etoile.

"Ah! Comtesse, you are right and wise not to do so," said the Prince Ioris, as he crossed over to her. "Smoking has no grace upon a woman's lips, and little sense on ours."

The Lady Joan hastily crossed over also, her cigar in her hand.

"What things you do say, Io," she muttered, crossly. "You know Lady Cardiff smokes like a steam-engine. How stupid you were at dinner, too! Go and amuse the Chief Justice; you see Mr. Challoner's boring him to death."

He went obedient, but not resigned, to address the Chief Justice, with all the warm and charming courtesy of his habitual manner, which, *en vrai Italien*, was never warmer or more charming than when he was somewhat annoyed and very much wearied. The Lady Joan presented Lady Cardiff to the Comtesse d'Avesnes, and, content with the diversion she had effected, repaid herself with joining her male guests, and receiving a person who just then entered, and whom she saluted delightedly as her "very dear old Mimo!"

The very dear old Mimo—otherwise Count Burletta—was a very shrewd person, of some fifty years old, fat and fair, smiling and serene. Fate had given him a meagre purse and a keen eye; he rambled about Rome, in and out all sorts of odd places, and about three o'clock might be found at home any day, surrounded with the fruits of his rambles, ivories, enamels, tarsia work, china, cloisonné, lac, anything and everything that garrets and palaces, cellars and convents, could be persuaded to render; in society he was a gentleman, and could lie like one; in his shop he was honest—unless he met with a fool: fools, he thought, were sent by the saints as food was sent by Elijah's ravens; he was a very good Catholic.

The very dear old Mimo, dropping now down on the divan beside her, murmured to her many things in a low tone, unheard by ears profane, and then drew out her guitar from under a pile of music.

"Io!" called the Lady Joan; "where's that last song of the Trastevere you wrote down for me?—the one we heard the girl sing as we came home from the Valle the other night?"

Ioris left the Chief Justice and searched for the song.

Being found, the Lady Joan would not sing it—she sang something else; the riband of her old Spanish guitar hanging over her shoulder; her sweeping velvet and her shining stars making a fine study for a painter; her handsome teeth gleaming and her eyes flashing up to her listeners with an amorous glittering gaze that burned its way straight up to the face of Ioris, who leaned towards her and beat the time softly with his hand, and gave back the answering glance that it was his due and his duty to give. But—

"That man is only feigning; why does he have to feign?" thought the Countess d'Avesnes, and looked to see if Mr. Challoner observed what she did.

Mr. Challoner was too well drilled by thirteen years of wedded life ever to observe anything; Mr. Challoner at the other end of the room discussed political news with the Chief Justice in an undertone, so as not to disturb his wife's singing. He never disturbed his wife; he was the marital model of the nineteenth century. There are many like him; but not perhaps many quite so perfect.

His wife's singing was agreeable, though she sang out of time and her accent was harsh; still she had a rich voice naturally, and could give the songs of the populace, and the erotic lays of the streets and fields, with a force and a *brío* hardly to be surpassed by the Romans themselves.

It was not pure execution nor perfect phrasing, and it used to set the teeth of real musicians on edge, but there was something contagious and intoxicating in it as she struck deep vibrations from the chords and poured from her glances a passionate light. She never looked so well as when she sang; it sent warmth into her lips and took the hardness from her face; singing, the passion that was in the woman broke up from the shrewd worldly sense, and the prosaic temper, that covered and hid it; singing, she looked like the swart sovereign of Musset's poem, who laughed to see the bold bull die, and flung her broided garter to her lover the matador.

"Allow me to compliment you on your gown, my dear Comtesse," said Lady Cardiff, meanwhile seated beside Etoile. "You must be tired of compliments on your talents. What charming things Worth does for people of taste! He *clothes* Mrs. Henry V. Clams over yonder, you know; what a difference! I am so glad you condescend to think about dress. It brings you nearer our poor humanity; genius so often, you know——"

"Is too much like St. Simeon Stylites; I quite agree with you. There is more affectation in sackcloth than in silk. Besides, to

be dressed with taste is a pleasure to one's self. What do you call that remarkable person who thinks it necessary to load herself with rubies for a little dinner party?"

"Mrs. Henry V. Clams. Fontebranda has made her, forced her down all our throats; very cleverly he has done it. He's no money, you know, and they've heaps. As somebody said of somebody in the last century (Duc d'Orléans, wasn't it?), not being able to make her Marquise Fontebranda, which I am sure he'd be very sorry to do, he has made himself Mr. Henry V. Clams, and I think it pays him very much better."

"I see. Do you visit them?"

"Oh, of course. Everybody visits them. They entertain very well; it's all Fontebranda. Are you staying long in Rome?"

"All the winter, I think."

"Delighted! I hope it's not true what they say—that your lungs are affected?"

"A little, I fear; nothing serious."

"Ah, dear me. Aldebaran—you should inhale Aldebaran. Do get a bottle. Consumption cured for half-a-crown; you know the thing I mean."

"I have more faith in the Roman air. Who is that person tuning Lady Joan's guitar?"

"Her very dear old Mimo? Well, that is—Mimo,—Count Burletta, you know. A good creature. Tradesman from twelve to four; Count all the rest of the day and night. If you want to buy teacups and triptychs, ask Lady Joan to take you there; and, if you want to please, pay, and don't ask the age of the object. Mean? Oh, I mean nothing. Mimo is a connoisseur—everybody is a connoisseur here—and gives ignorant people the benefit of his knowledge. That is all. How do you like her singing?"

"Well, you see, I am too used to great music to be very easily pleased. The first musicians of Paris gather at my house, and then my friend Dorotea sings to me alone so constantly."

"Ah, the Duchesse Santorin. She is here, isn't she?"

"She is gone. She only came to see me one day. She was engaged at Petersburg. She has promised me to return in two months."

"Tell me, do tell me. You must know. Is it true that Santorin has sent her a citation to appear; that he is about to sue for a separation?"

"He has sent her a schedule of his latest debts. That is all that I know of——"

"But there is some scandal about that handsome Russian, Souroff, that Imperial aide-de-camp—you know whom I mean. What is his name? Fédor?"

"There is no cause for any; that I can assure you. Count Souroff is in the Caucasus."

"Dear me!" said Lady Cardiff vaguely, disappointed, but reflecting that of course the friend of the Duchesse Santorin must *say* that sort of thing.

"Lady Joan looks very handsome as she sings," said Etoile, to change the theme.

The English peeress put her glass up to her eye, and looked at the singer.

"A good-looking woman, yes, and highly born, and young still, and no fool, and yet married to a Mr. Challoner!

"There are very odd things in life, are there not?" continued the Marchioness musingly. "Nothing odder than its Mr. Challoners. You know her father? Indeed! A charming person: very unlike *her*, don't you think? Yes, I am going; sorry to leave you, but I must look in at the Ruspoli's. I shall slip out quietly while she is making that noise. So charmed you have come to Rome, my dear Comtesse. Pray, don't forget my Mondays."

"I suppose people do receive her?" said Lady Cardiff to her host, who rushed to intercept her passage, and escort her down the stairs.

"Whom? Etoile? Oh, certainly, there never was a breath against her."

"Oh, my dear Mr. Challoner, I don't mean that. What *does* that matter? We receive tens of thousands of people with nor'-westers blowing them black and blue"—(Mr. Challoner winced)—"every day of their lives. Heaps of good people are out of society, and heaps of bad people in; only we can't receive anybody unless other folks receive her too. Nobody can *begin*, you know. It gets thrown against you afterwards; if a woman is really received, it don't in the least matter what she's done or what she does do. Nobody's any business with the rest of her life. *Is* she received? That is all. As for this particular woman, she is charming. And, of course, everybody *you* know has the passport to my house, and every other house. Coming to the Ruspoli's? No? Ah, true! You don't know them. Pity. Many thanks. Very cold. Thanks. Good evening."

And, having wrapped up many thorns in velvet in her parting speech, the Marchioness of Cardiff rolled away in her carriage to the Palazzo Ruspoli, leaving Mr. Challoner bowing on the step in the teeth of the sharp easterly wind, with all the thorns pricking in him as he turned and went upstairs. Happily for himself, he *had* a tough epidermis, and could remain impenetrable to thorns and even harpoons. Mr. Challoner knew that nothing answers in the long run like invulnerability.

His voice was still singing when he entered, and her very dear old Mimo was praising a little Masolino panel to the Chief Justice, who did not know much about art, but was very open-handed with his money, all the world knew.

The Prince Ioris, having gazed his heart out through three songs, and made his eyes utter more amorous lyrics than any she sang, thought he *had* done what duty required of him, and sank away quietly into a corner of the sofa by Etoile, and picked up some fallen leaves of the tea-roses, and talked with serious feeling and graceful taste of various themes of art, and gazed at her as he did so with that musing studious regard which is the subtlest form of early homage.

The Lady Joan saw, and sang out of time for two seconds. The Lady Joan threw her guitar aside with a haste and force that imperilled its safety, and came out of her little circle of admiring listeners, and bore down on the sofa where Ioris was still tossing a few fragrant tea-rose leaves in his hand and talking of art.

"Go with her to-morrow to the Loggè?" she called out sharply. "What are you thinking of, Io? You've got to take me to the studios; and then there is that bust to see to at Trillo's, and the Bishop of Melita coming to luncheon, and there are heaps of things in the afternoon. You can't go anywhere to-morrow. Besides, she's got old Padre Marcello—a man who carries more art-knowledge about Rome in his little finger than you do in all your brain, which is not the very biggest to hold anything."

She laughed as she spoke, and blew some smoke round her classic hand.

Ioris bowed resignedly.

"I am at your commands, madame, of course, as always."

"Oh, are you!" said his hostess, roughly, too out of temper to be able to control the irritability she felt. "Then another time don't keep me twenty minutes waiting, as you did this morning at Trillo's. What were you after?"

"I was at the Vatican."

"Well, you must be here to-morrow at ten. Mind that; and see Pippo has the new curb on; he jibbed dreadfully yesterday. Are you going? So early? I am so sorry; it is only eleven o'clock," she continued, with her frankest, pleasantest smile, as Etoile rose from the sofa, unconscious that her rose-leaves had been falling on a volcano's brink.

"We must be friends for my father's sake," said Lady Joan; "how glad I am you came to Rome!" and she followed her through the rooms and the ante-room, with cordial phrases and a dozen pleasant kindly plans for future intimacy and mutual amusement.

Ioris, evading direction, reached down the furs, and enveloped with them the maize and black bows of Worth, and gave Etoile his arm.

"How handsome she is, and very agreeable," said Etoile, as they went downstairs.

Ioris was silent.

"You are a friend of Lord Archie's?" he said, after a moment's pause—a pause, it seemed to her, of some slight embarrassment.

"Yes; I know him well—dear gentle Lord Archie."

"I also am fond of Lord Archie."

"Are you any relation to them?"

"None at all," replied Ioris, with a certain impatience. "I may have the honour to call on you, madame. Perhaps I may be of some little use. No doubt you will know every one in Rome, but anything that I could do——"

Mr. Challoner overtook them on the staircase, with Mrs. Henry V. Clams and Fontebranda, who were leaving also.

"My wife wants you, Ioris," said the gentleman; "there is some other song that can't be found."

"You have forgotten this, madame," said Ioris, in the street, as he escaped from Mr. Challoner, putting the big black Spanish fan through the window of the carriage. "And do not heed what the Lady Joan said. I will have the honour of waiting on you to-morrow at noon for the Loggè, and although certainly I cannot compete in knowledge with the Padre Marcello, still, if zeal and devotion can serve you at all in this my native city——"

The horses, impatient, reared and plunged forward on the uneven pavement of the street, and left his phrase unfinished upon Etoile's ear.

He looked a moment into the moonlight, then reascended the stairs.

"Io!" cried the Lady Joan; "come and make me some fresh cigarettes. Now we can enjoy ourselves. Mimo's got such a capital story; awfully *saluto*, but so good."

CHAPTER VII.

THE Lady Joan Challoner came of a very good old stock.

The Perth-Douglas family was one about whose ancientness and admirableness there could never be any dispute. The Perth-Douglasses had always been gentlefolks, and their names could be read backwards by the light of history as far as the days of Flodden and of Bannockburn. Though of such knightly descent, they were very poor, and of no great estate; but they were own cousins to the mighty Earl of Hebrides, had intermarried with the no less mighty Marquises of Lothian, were cousins-german to the Dukes of Lochwithian and the Lords of Fingal, and owned Scotch cousinships to more peers than the Order of the Thistle embraces, and as many baronets as the Nova Scotia riband adorns.

Her father, Archibald Angus Perth-Douglas, fifth Earl of Archiestoun—always called by his friends Archie—had no seat in the Lords, and was glad of a Government place, and a small office at Court. He was an infinitely charming person, whom everybody loved and caressed. Her mother had been a beauty and a wit; her grandmother the same. The Lady Joan, at nineteen, had been married to Mr. Robert Challoner, an obscure gentleman, whose parentage was doubtful, and whose prosperity was dubious. People had wondered very much why such a handsome well-born girl as Joan Perth-Douglas should be married to a Mr. Challoner.

If she had been a trifle cleverer than the clever woman she was, of course she would have told people she had adored him, and had insisted on having him and none other. But as she always told everybody roundly that she had always hated him, this explanation could not be put forward by even her blindest admirers.

There were one or two people who did know why—really why—but a popular and eminent politician had been trustee to the marriage settlements, and no one could be indiscreet enough to persist in inquiring why the settlements ever had been drawn up at all.

The Lady Joan all her life long was rich in discreet friends.

Still even the discreetest friends will, like the closest-packed hold of a ship, leak occasionally. Salt water and secrets are alike apt to ooze. So, whatever the reason might be, the Challoners lived out of England.

The Perth-Douglasses were clever people, and had had the

knack of always frequenting the society of cleverer people than themselves. Without ever having distinguished themselves intellectually, they yet had thus gained an intellectual reputation; and on the feet of their ladies there had been often stockings of blue.

For gentle, gracious, handsome Earl Archie, his women were too many and too strong, and they worried him sorely; he consoled himself with society which was always delighted to console him. His wife—beautiful and masterful—and his mother and sisters, not so beautiful, but masterful too, disputed and quarrelled and vexed him. He was a man who thought peace the one supreme good of life, but he was seldom destined to enjoy it. His lot was cast throughout existence amidst *maîtresses-femmes*: they are admirable and wonderful beings, no doubt, but no man ever found them conducive to his comfort as companions.

Of his daughter Lord Archie had never felt that he knew very much. He had thought the marriage a very odd one and a very disadvantageous one, and had done his best in his gentle, sweet-tempered, tranquil fashion to oppose it. But when he was told by his wife and his old friend the eminent politician that it had to be, and was the best thing that could be, he acquiesced, because acquiescence had become his habit with his numerous feminine rulers.

He was not behind the scenes; and they told him a great many fictions of the Challoner fortune and the Challoner devotion: after all it was as the girl liked, it was her affair more than any one's.

Gentle Lord Archie thought everything was for the best in this best of all possible worlds. He never worried himself or anybody else. He gave away his daughter at the altar, to what he stigmatised in his own soul as a cad, with the same benign placidity with which, a dozen years afterwards, he lay in the sunshine and smoked his cigars under the walnut trees at Fior-delisa: everything was all right—that was Lord Archie's formula. It is the only one possible for a man governed by three generations of women with wills of their own.

Thirteen years had gone by since Lord Archie had led his daughter up to the marriage altar, wondering why Joan, who had been a good deal admired at her first drawing-room, and had spirit enough for fifty cavalry soldiers, had not waited a little while and done better for herself.

Thirteen years found the Lady Joan still a young woman.

She had swept a good deal of adventure into the dozen and one seasons that Mr. Challoner's name had been her sunshade in the heats of slander, and her waterproof in the storms of censure.

Mr. Challoner's business, in which he had risen from a clerk to a managing partner, lying in Damascus and Aleppo, she had

had the far East and the vague sand-plains of distant countries for her theatre; and, in spite of steam and of electricity—those fatal levellers of illusion—the “far Orient” still remains to the European mind a shadowy and gorgeous panorama of mystery.

Perhaps through that golden haze of distance the European mind saw the adventures of the Lady Joan, as in a mirage, multiplied; at any rate, home-coming travellers told many tales, and averred that “Archie’s daughter” was “going it over there.” She had Asiatic ministers for her henchmen, and Turkish pashas for her obedient slaves; big bankers were as babies in her hands, and imperial steamers were at her beck and call; when a good-looking wayfarer chanced to have time for such pastimes, she would have her Arab steeds saddled and scamper away with him over the Syrian Desert; and a young titled Giaour on his pilgrimage found no resting-place more agreeable than her flat house-top in Damascus, with champagne in the ice-pails and Mr. Challoner in his counting-house.

If anybody thought it odd that she should camp out on the sand plains with strangers, such people were old fogies in the Lady Joan’s eyes; these men were all her brothers—a kind providence sent them to prevent her yawning her head off with the intolerable boredom of Mr. Challoner’s company—and she would jump on her mare, and cut her across the ears, and scamper off with silver-mounted pistols in her sash, and a cigar in her mouth, knowing very well that Mrs. Grundy cannot do you much harm when you ride under the shadow of Mount Lebanon. And even had Mrs. Grundy loomed there in the stead of Mount Lebanon, she could have said nothing, because Mr. Challoner himself never said anything.

He busied himself with his exports of jewellery and prayer-carpets, of spice and specie, of rubies and rice, and his business generally, and his fellow merchants, and his own reflections; and moved about Damascus, and other cities of the East, a very big man amongst the Jews and Gentiles, the Turks and the Persians, because of the Perth-Douglas connection away in the North, and the privilege it bestowed on him to ask any travelling Englishman of rank to dinner and speak of “my wife’s cousins,” the Countess of Hebrides, or the Duchess of Lochwithian.

When, some six years later, having ruined a very fine business by too fine speculations, he found it expedient to leave the bazaars and retreat on his wife’s settlements, she brought with her from the red Eastern skies a duskier hue on her handsome face, a great skill at rolling cigarettes, much good Turkish tobacco, and some good Oriental jewellery, some trash and some treasure out of the bazaars, a great many souvenirs—some tender, some fierce—and a decided experience that she might play “poker” with all the Ten Commandments, so long as she wrapped herself in the proof armour of Mr. Challoner’s approval and acquiescence.

She had learnt by heart the Arab proverb, that "she who has her husband with her may turn the moon around her finger."

So useful was her husband, indeed, that at weak moments she was almost grateful to him, and absolutely called him Robert, a condescension very rare with her, as she never let him or anybody forget that she had a right to write herself "born Perth-Douglas."

But the Black Sea once crossed again, the Lady Joan saw Mrs. Grundy, the British Bona Dea, looming large on her horizon, as the Colossus once did upon the sea from Rhodes.

The Lady Joan was shrewd enough to know that the British Bona Dea will not believe that all men are your brothers. The Lady Joan pulled her mainsail in, and tacked her course so as to pass safely under the Colossus.

It had not been worth while out there, but here it was so. And, after all, it was better to keep decently well with that little house in Mayfair, and all the family ties and honours. The little house had borne a great deal indeed, as little houses when they are the abode of a Great House often do; great houses never washing their dirty linen in the street. But Lady Joan knew that there were some things that would be too strong even for the little house in Mayfair, and that it would never do not to dine there when she went over "on business" to London, though she had to scream till she was hoarse into her grandmother's car-trumpet, and derived no pleasure from hearing the Head of the Opposition read his "Notes on the Cæcumenical Council" or his conception of an obscure passage of Tertullian.

So, for sake of the little house in Mayfair, and of a great many big houses all over Europe that she desired to enter, the Lady Joan, leaving the Bagdad bazaars and the Great Desert, left her imprudence behind her, and consigned everything of a dangerous sort to oblivion, except the Sultan's inspiration of her letters to the *Planet* newspaper, and the pearls with which the Emir of Yarkund had presented her for saving his life from poison.

For, on touching a European strand, the hand of Mrs. Grundy clasped her, and the shadow of Mrs. Grundy fell on her as in eclipse falls the shade of the stolid earth upon the giddy moon.

In the East, Lady Joan had been very young, very reckless, with her spirits far outbalancing her prudence, and her savageness at her exile and social extinction avenging itself by all those wild night-rides with the good-looking travellers, and all those campings out under the desert stars, with nobody to play propriety except the Arab boys and the tethered ponies.

The Lady Joan in her childhood, even in the year or two between her presentation at Court and her social extinction under the Challoner settlements, had seen the really great world. All that was best in society had habitually gathered round her

beautiful mother. She knew what mighty people and witty people, and people of fashion and people of genius were. For the Anglo-Persian world of shabby adventurers, of hungry commercial folks, of intriguing speculators, of oily Jews, of lean Gentiles, and of trade-fattened nobodies her contempt had been naturally boundless. She had done as she liked, and scoffed at the whole lot, and only smiled on them when she wanted a steamer or any such little trifle of them. She was a Porth-Douglas; and if she chose to dance the Carmagnole in all their counting-houses, the mercantile mud of Asia Minor could only be honoured: so she danced it.

But when the chill colossal shadow of Mrs. Grundy fell across her path Lady Joan saw that she must mend her ways. It was not steamers that she would want now, but suffrages.

Of course she despised Mrs. Grundy as much as she had despised the mercantile mud; Mrs. Grundy was an old cat, and represented old cats collectively. Still it was necessary to conciliate her, and even in the country of the *cicisbei* it would be best to be on good terms with Society.

Of course Society should never really interfere with her liberty; of course Society should never prevent her regarding all men as her brothers; of course Society should never alter her dancing the Carmagnole over the *convenances*, as she had done over the counting-houses whenever she liked; nevertheless, she said to herself she would reconcile herself with Society.

There were many things to be got by it, and Society after all asks very little. Society only asks you to wash the outside of your cup and platter: inside you may keep any kind of nastiness that you like; only wash the outside; do wash the outside, says Society; and it would be a churl or an ass indeed who would refuse so small a request.

Lady Joan set to work and washed her cup and platter with such a clatter and so many soap-suds, and summoned so many good people to look on at her doing it, that no one could possibly ask her what she drank and ate out of it, nor who sipped from it with her.

Mr. Challoner himself set both cup and platter upon a shelf in the sight of Society. Society could want no more.

As lawless free-lances in days of old entered monkish cells and buried Dick the Devil or Dent du Sanglier for ever under Brother Philarete or Father Joseph, so the Lady Joan, entering society, immured her Eastern escapades under the seal of an entire self-oblivion. Nothing was ever to be remembered by anybody that she wished to be forgotten. This was settled. It is a demand that women are very fond of making on the good-nature or the good taste of mankind. And if occasionally she met an old friend uncivil enough or unkind enough, without knowing that he did wrong, to "hint past history" and disturb

the present, she would, with all the heartiest air of candour and of wonder in the world,

“Stare upon the strange man’s face
As one she ne’er had known,”

and continue so to stare in despite of all recollections that he might invoke.

It was still a marriage for which none could see any *raison d’être*. But when you go to the East and stay there in a kind of golden mist it is easy to leave explanations behind you when you return. All that trading of the Levant in various goods, from bales of hay to squares of prayer-carpet, to which Mr. Challoner owed his being, had come to an untimely ending, as was well enough known, from Bagdad to Brindisi, by all merchants and bankers. And Mr. Challoner had only saved a few thousands out of the crash, and was, in real truth, an unfortunate gentleman with a hankering turn for speculation.

But the Lady Joan was not troubled by such little facts as these; the magnificence of her imagination raised her far above all prosaic realities; what a few old fogies in bank parlours or on public exchanges might say or know was nothing to her; according to her Mr. Challoner had been Croesus; the rice and the carpets were merged vaguely into what she called “our bank;” Solomon’s Temple had not been more gorgeous than the fortunes to which her family had sacrificed her.

There had been failures; yes, certainly there had been failures; but then even Croesus could not escape Cyrus.

As for what those old fools of consuls and merchants said, that was all rubbish; and she would close with an apotheosis of herself as a sort of Semiramis of Finance, in which the angels who upheld her in the empyrean were “dear old Pam,” and “dear old Thiers,” and “dear old Elgin,” and anybody else of magnitude appropriate whom she had ever had a nod from in her babyhood in her grandmother’s little house in Mayfair.

There was, indeed, scarce a great man in France, England, or Germany whom she did not claim as her “dearest old” A, B, or C; if a critic or a chancellor, a *savant* or a general, a geographer or a Prime Minister had ever walked thirty years before into her mother’s drawing-room when she was playing on the hearthrug with her alphabet, the critic or chancellor, the *savant* or general, the geographer or Prime Minister was now for ever in the mouth of the Lady Joan as her one dearest old friend, that was more devoted to her than any other living creature on the face of the earth.

Perhaps she had recalled herself once to their bewildered memories in some crowded reception; perhaps she had bowed to them twice in the Prater, the Bois, or the Mall; perhaps she never had seen them at all since the days of her alphabet; all

this mattered nothing; the critic or chancellor, *savant*, general, geographer, or Prime Minister never were by when she dilated upon them with such glowing affection; and, even if they had been, would have been too polite to contradict her. Gentlemen do not contradict women, nor yet show them up; a chivalrous weakness of mankind, of which the weaker sex always takes the very sternest advantage.

Occasionally those disagreeable and sceptical people who are to be found spoiling all society would hint that, with such distinguished friendships and such illimitable political and literary connections, it was a little wonderful that the Lady Joan should have married a Mr. Challoner and take an interest in teacups and triptychs. But such people were in the minority. For the most part, her use of her dearest old A, B, and C, at moments when A was organising a great war, or B busied in discrowning kings, or C sending forth on the world a great book mighty as Thor's hammer, was of infinite gain to her; and her allies would go hither and thither, important and confidential, and whisper, "She knew the declaration of war five days before anybody;" or "He wrote to her the very night he dictated his abdication;" or "She had an early copy even before it went to the *Revue des Deux-Mondes*;" and these fictions flew about lively as gnats and productive as bees, and secured many cards to her big Delft card-plate, because, though nobody believed all of it, everybody said some of it must be true—yes, a great deal of it must be true—because people never will admit or even think that they are the mere dupes of a brilliant audacity.

To the world in general A, B, and C were names of magnitude and weight, of awe or of adoration, as the case might be; but to her they were only "dear old creatures." Had they not stumbled over her alphabet thirty years before upon her mother's hearthrug?

It was an alliance for a lifetime.

According to the Lady Joan she was a Nausicaa, airily frolicking on the edge of the vast ocean of European complications; and Odysseus had gone through all his woes and warfare, and only lay in wait under the waves, just to be ready to catch her ball for her—only just for that.

Odysseus never even saw her, never even thought of her, as he waded in his deep dark seas; but all that did not matter to her.

Nor to her associates.

"Such a woman! ah, such a woman!" would murmur plump Mimo Burletta. "Palmerstonè relied on her for all his secret information of Oriental things; Palmerstonè told her when she was eighteen that if she were but a man she would die Prime Minister of the Crown; Palmerstonè was not one to call a lemon-pip a lemon—ah, no, no, no!—Palmerstonè knew!" And Bur-

letta would walk about and spread out his fat hands in honest adoration of her mighty powers and of himself for being the confidant of so great a creature; and in his mind's eye, when it was not concentrated on teacups and triptychs, always beheld the Lady Joan seated as on a throne within the sacred recesses of the Privy Council chamber of the Universe, for he knew as much about such things as a French grocer in the provinces knows of the *Lord Maire de Londres*, and the Lady Joan's magnificent confidences had dazzled him too much to much enlighten him.

Exaggeration aside, she had very great connections and relationships, and never forgot or let anybody else forget that she had them. When a cousin of high degree came near she proclaimed the fact as loudly and loyally as heralds in days of old shouted the titles and tidings of a new king, and these mighty personages did her unwittingly yeoman's service.

They were her cork bnoys on the yeasty seas of European society. Big people liked her because she took such infinite trouble to please them, and little people liked her because she could bring them in contact with the big people.

Both big and little people always apologised to one another for knowing her; every one excused their own especial countenance on some especial plea in their own especial society. But as she never knew this it did not affect her comfort; indeed, Lady Joan was of that happy disposition which could ignore all enmity and accept all slights unmoved; and if she knew some one had been abusing her would meet the offender with such a smile, and such an emphatic cordiality, that she was the best Christian that ever, being buffeted on one cheek, turned graciously the other.

It was thoroughly sound policy.

Proud women, and sensitive women, take hints and resent rebuffs, and so exile themselves from the world prematurely and haughtily. They abdicate, the moment they see that any desire their discrowning. But Lady Joan was not troubled with this kind of delicacy. Abdication is grand, no doubt. But possession is more profitable. "A well-bred dog does not wait to be kicked out," says the old sec-saw. But the well-bred dog thereby turns himself into the cold and leaves the crumbs from under the table to some other dog with less good-breeding and more worldly wisdom. The sensible thing to do is to stay wherever you like best to be; stay there with tooth and claw ready and a stout hide on which cudgels break. People, after all, soon get tired of kicking a dog that never will go.

High-breeding was admirable in days when the world itself was high-bred. But those days are over. The world takes high-breeding now as only a form of insolence.

Lady Joan saw this, and never troubled the world with it.

"The old cat slangs me like a pickpocket," she would say of some dowager-countess who did not return her card. But when she met the dowager-countess she would say, "Ah, dearest Lady Blank! Where *are* you staying? I am *so* sorry I have seen *so* little of you. You'll come and dine with us? What night, now? Do fix a night—pray do."

And nine times out of ten the Lady Blanks would relent and leave a card, and even go and eat a dinner at the Casa Challoner. For the Casa Challoner dinners were good, and the Casa Challoner understood the axiom that it is not what comes out of your own mouth, but what you put into other people's, that makes your friends or enemies. Besides, "you can't cut a woman who won't know when she's cut," said a Lady Blank once:—Lady Joan had this most useful ignorance.

So on the whole she managed to enjoy life in Europe as in the East. There were always times when she could "throw her cap over the mill," and dance the Carmagnole, if there were also many seasons that she had to put on her meeting-house clothes and curtsy to Mrs. Grundy.

And besides, be the season what it would, there was always—Fiordelisa.

CHAPTER VIII.

On the morrow the Prince Ioris, faithful to his word, went as noon chimed from all the bells of Rome to the Hôtel de Russie and inquired for the Comtesse d'Avesnes. But he learned that she had already gone out, alone; had been out since sunrise. He left his card and turned his steps along the Corso to the Casa Challoner. He was a good deal disappointed and a little irritated—more irritated than was reasonable.

"How late you are, lo! I told you ten o'clock," said the Lady Joan, in high wrath.

She was ready-dressed for the streets, with her hat set well over her black brows, and her person muffled in sealskin. Her friend noticed for the first time that her skirts were too short, and her boots were ill-made, and her eyes were green in the sunlight.

He pressed both her hands in his own and dropped on one knee before her sofa.

"You must forgive me. My head ached, and I had many letters to see to and answer."

"I thought you were gone to Etoile. You talked of it," said the Lady Joan, with an angry suspicion flashing in her eyes.

"Etoile! Cara mia, what living woman could keep me away one second from here?"

Kneeling still on the tigerskin before her, his lips caressed her with more softness than the words.

"Don't be a goose, Io; we're past all that—at least so early in the morning," said the Lady Joan. But she smiled as she pushed him away, and was well pleased that he should be what she called a goose. Had he not been thus a goose, darkest wrath would have gathered on her stormy brows.

"Let's get off, though," she said, disengaging herself, but sweeping his hair off his forehead with a rough caress as she rose. "We're so late as it is, and I am awfully afraid that the dealer from Paris will have got those little pictures of Cecchino's—the boy's beginning to know his value and ask a price."

Ioris loaded himself with her wraps, her umbrella, and her little dog, and followed her down the stairs to the *fiacre*.

When she did not take his ponies out she drove in a hack carriage. Not to keep a carriage was an economy on which she prided herself.

"A carriage is only ostentation—snobs want one: I don't," she would say in her blunt, pleasant manner. "I always tell Mr. Challoner I like my own legs; and when they're tired there's always a cab; cabs are so cheap."

And so, indeed, they were, since Ioris always paid for them.

The hired carriage started off, Mr. Challoner regarding its departure placidly from a window, for his friendship and his faith were both strong, and the wheels rattled noisily up and down the hilly streets of Rome.

"What did you think of Etoile?" she asked Ioris as they drove. Etoile was very much in her own thoughts.

"She does not please me particularly," he answered carelessly as he lighted a cigar.

"Do you think her attractive?"

"No, not at all."

"We must see a good deal of her. Voightel recommends her to me so strongly."

Her friend shrugged his shoulders.

"Why do you do that? Will she bore you?"

"I think her manner insolent. She seems to see no one. She is *nonchalante*: she is indifferent. I should think her cold."

"She must warm for you, Io!" said Lady Joan, with a gleam of anxiety and irony in her eyes.

"Oh! *Dieu m'en garde!*"

It was said with so genuine an emphasis, and so careless and gay a laugh, that Lady Joan was quite satisfied as she ascended

and descended scores of dark, foul-smelling stairways, her friend behind her, into the garrets of the young painters. The Challoners were well-known patrons of young painters, and especially given to such patronage when those studious lads had a talent for making new canvases look like old.

The Lady Joan adored art: she told everybody so. She passed half her present life striding in and out of ateliers, and petting painters, and buying canvases; the cheaper she bought them the better was she pleased, for of course the Challoner purse could not afford a large purchase except now and then on speculation.

The old masters, fortunately for the Challoner purse, were so bounteously thoughtful of those who would come after them (and sell them) that they all had their schools. Now, "Scuola di Perugino," "Scuola di Tiziano," sounds almost as imposing as Perugino and Tiziano alone; and, what is still more advantageous, these schools have been prolonged into the present day, and have many disciples hard at work still in the various styles, on impasto and *chiaroscuro* with varnish and smoke, in many attics and cellars of Florence, Naples, and Rome. To these young disciples the Lady Joan was a goddess; and if they grumbled now and then at her prices, that was but youth's idle ingratitude, Minerva was not worse than a dealer; whilst away in Great Britain acres on acres of new plaster walls bloomed with fair Madonnas and glowed with fierce martyrdoms; and Shoddy, that had built the walls, was satisfied and triumphant. So much joy can one clever woman diffuse.

The young painters did, indeed, say savage things of these kind patrons of theirs in moments of confidence, when together over macaroni and wines in an *osteria* outside the gates. But this was only the ingratitude of the artistic nature, which, it is well known, always does turn against its best benefactors. And when one was born a Perth-Douglas, and has been obliged to marry a Mr. Challoner, and has never had as much money as one wanted for anything, it would be hard indeed if one might not enjoy such innocent compensations as may lie for one in the fine arts.

Most people (except artists) carried off the impression that Lady Joan knew a good deal about art. She had a bright, firm, imposing way of declaring her opinions infallible that went far towards making others believe them so. She knew that in this Age of Advertisement modesty is your ruin; what one has does not matter much, it is by what one seems to have that one rises or falls nowadays.

Connoisseurs and scholars found Lady Joan appallingly ignorant, and looked at each other helplessly when she swore a Byzantine crucifix was a Cellini, or a bit of Berlin *pâte dure* was Capo di Monte; when she assigned rococo jewellery to Agnès

Sorel, and a panel of the Bologna Decadence to Andre Mantegna.

But then those connoisseurs and scholars are not all the world, and Lady Joan addressed herself to that much larger body—the great majority of the uneducated. Indeed, perhaps nobody can comprehend how utterly uneducated it is possible to be, who has not lived entirely with the educated classes.

Before the mass of idle people, moneyed people, ladies of fashion, and princes of shoddy, she found an audience credulous of her assertions and uncritical of her pretensions, and very easily dazzled and bewildered with a little talk about schools and tones; about early painters whom they did not like to avow they had never heard of; about Frankenthal, which they vaguely mixed up with Frankenstein; about Mare Antonios, which they confused with Mare Antony; about Nankin, which they thought was a stuff, and found was a china; of Rose Dubarry, which they fancied somehow was something immoral; of Certosina, which they had an idea must mean something monastic; and of Bramante, which rhymed with Rozinante, and must be Spanish, they felt sure.

To rely on the general ignorance of mankind is usually safe, and Lady Joan did so rely not in vain. She was often found out in her blunders, indeed, and often laughed at; but then, as she was a gentlewoman, and not a tradesman, nobody ever told her, and people only laughed behind her back. That she could by any possibility ever be laughed at, never entered her own imagination.

This morning she raced up and down innumerable stairs, and in and out innumerable workshops of painters and sculptors and wood carvers, her hat well pulled down over her broad black brows, and her friend labouring under her wraps behind her. She cheapened everything she saw; made a million mistakes, which her friend softly corrected *sotto voce*; sat down astride before the easels, smoked the artists' cigars; diffused generally a sense of her own enormous influence with the English press and the English purchasers; bought a good deal of canvas and terra-cotta at dealers' prices; wearied her companion and bullied him, slapped students on the shoulders and rallied them with boisterous good fellowship; enjoyed herself exceedingly, and then, as the clock struck one in a neighbouring church-tower, "pulled herself together," and recollected her social duties.

"Come to luncheon, Io," she said, after the last studio, flinging away her last cigar-end. "Yes, you'd better come. It's the Bishop of Melita and roast mutton. Oh yes, a horrid bore; but you'd better come. If the Bishop lunch with *you*, it'll shut 'em up for a twelvemonth."

Who were to be "shut up" she did not explain, but her

companion understood that the indefinite expression alluded to Mrs. Grundy and her myriad mouths.

"*Qui est Madame Gründée, ma chère ?*" the Prince Ioris had asked in surprise on first hearing of this mighty dame ; but he never asked now : he had learned that Madame Gründée was the Bona Dea of the Lady Joan.

"My dear Io! you don't know Mrs. Grundy!" Lady Joan would retort, when he wondered to see the cigars banished, the laugh hushed, the propriety donned, the domestic scene set, and Mr. Challoner taken about in the stead of himself, when the mighty Northerners came down with all pomp into Rome. She herself did know Mrs. Grundy ; had felt that lady's buffets, and knew the power of that lady's smile. She was aware that Mrs. Grundy represented money, dinners, court balls, embassy receptions, and all the rest of the advantages of society, and in her heart of hearts, though she would boast otherwise, was afraid of Mrs. Grundy—sorely afraid sometimes.

There is no such coward as the woman who toadies society because she has outraged society. The bully is never brave.

"Oignez villain il vous poindra : poignez villain il vous oindra," is as true of the braggart's soul still, as it used to be in the old days of Froissart, when the proverb was coined.

Lady Joan was a bully by nature, and gave way to her nature without scruple or pity ; but she knew that society was a bigger bully than herself, and did homage to it in the dust accordingly.

On this occasion Prince Ioris shuddered at the idea of cooked sheep as even one of his own peasants would have done ; and an English bishop was to him a nondescript animal of appalling and inexplicable anatomy ; but he was well used to surrendering his own will, and accompanied his hostess submissively to her house, where he brushed the dust off himself and washed his hands in Mr. Challoner's own sanctum in that amicable community of goods which characterised his and that gentleman's friendship.

The Lady Joan carefully deodorised herself of all traces of cigar-smoke, brushed back her hair, and, sitting down for ten minutes by her dressing-room fire, glanced hurriedly through an article in the *Contemporary Review* on the dispute between Valentinian and Damasus in the days of the Early Church ; then, telling Ioris to come in five minutes after her, as if he came through the hall-door, went herself ready primed in all the proprieties to receive the Anglican Bishop of Melita and his wife to the roast loin of thoroughly domestic mutton.

The Anglican Bishop of Melita was a spare, solemn, scholarly person, who had been head of a House in Cambridge in his time. His wife was a no less solemn but much stouter personage, who had been the daughter of a dean, and was the niece,

sister, and sister-in-law of quite countless canons, rectors, and pastors of all kinds. They had been presented to the Challoners two days before; and Mr. Challoner, who could bring up heavy artillery when required not unsuccessfully, had immediately engaged them for luncheon at once and a dinner at eight days' notice.

Mr. Challoner's own recollections of the island of Melita were not agreeable ones; but for that very reason he desired that all the world should behold how intimate he was with the Bishop of that valuable English possession. It was, indeed, by attention to such trifles as these that Mr. Challoner had succeeded in burying from the eyes of his wife's world all the uncomfortable little secrets that Melita had known of him and his. In this matter he and the Lady Joan were almost of accord. Whatever else they disagreed about (and they did disagree about nearly everything), they always agreed that it was absolutely necessary to muzzle Madame Gründée. Madame Gründée is the one deity that English Society recognises—indeed, the only one that makes it go to church at all.

Lady Joan, a bold woman, grinned and grimaced at the goddess in the privacy of her life; but, being a wise woman, she did decorous worship to the goddess in the sight of others. She snapped her fingers at her Bona Dea behind her back; but she took care to bow with the rest in front of the altars.

This is the true wisdom of a woman. A poet's brain leaks through dreams, and is too big to hold such knowledge; but brains like the Lady Joan's are long and close and narrow, and shrewdly contain it.

Lady Joan thought that only a fool never hedged.

She liked her pleasures, certainly, but she liked still better a good balance of many figures at Torlonia's. Illness might come, disfigurement might come, accident might come; age certainly would come. In those events lovers grow scarce, but the cosy swansdowns and sables of society and a safe income will console for their absence. We weaker mortals may find an infinite sadness in the picture of Sophie Arnould, once the Goddess of Love of all Paris, sweeping in her trembling old age the snow away from her miserable door; Sophie Arnould, once the lovely, the incomparable, the twin sister of the Graces, muttering, with the wind whistling round her withered limbs, of the dead days when all the Beau Siècle raved of the beauty of those feet and ankles; but the Lady Joan would only have laughed and said, "Old ass! she should have laid by her golden eggs while she got 'em." Lady Joan felt that she herself would never derive any consolation for being the subject of other people's tears; she meant to live and die comfortably, and never sweep the streets for other people: so she hedged.

Luckily for herself Lady Joan had as many manners as there

are changes in a child's box of metamorphoses. Now and then, indeed, she overdid her part. Now and then she danced the Carmagnole, as one may say, by mistake, in her meeting-house clothes, or grinned when she should have pulled a long face. But on the whole she trimmed her candle cleverly, whether it had to be burned before the altar of the British Bona Dea, or whether it might flare as it liked amongst the dancing tapers of joyous Giovedì Grasso.

On such occasions as this luncheon, the Casa Challoner was a temple of family felicity; it had Bass's beer and household harmony; it had the *Times* on the table, and said "my love" every five minutes; it had plain English cooking and simple English affections; it talked politics from English points of view, and sighed that its general health compelled it to be out of dear old England so much.

Indeed, if only Mr. Challoner could have managed to look a little less wooden, and Lady Joan would not now and then have put her tongue in her cheek and grinned with an "aside" to her friend, the whole thing would have been perfect; even as it was it was masterly, especially when Mr. Challoner explained, under his breath: "a great friend of ours—poor fellow, his affairs were very involved—estate going to rack and ruin. I think we have helped him—yes, I may say we have helped him;" and when the Lady Joan, at the top of her table, sighed as she spoke of her beloved and lamented mother, talked a great deal—"so openly; oh, so openly!" as her guests said afterwards, "there could be nothing in it!"—of Fiordelisa and of its owner, who was like a brother to her and her husband, and made effective tableaux of maternal devotion with her little daughter, Effie, who was twelve years old and very timid and shy, but who contributed not a little to the effect of the entertainment, especially when, with Lady Joan's arm round her, the little girl called the Prince Ioris—"Io."

"An excellent creature, let them say what they like," thought the Bishop's wife, whose *côté faible* was motherly excellence.

"A very charming woman," thought the Bishop, while the Lady Joan listened, with her eyes brightly shining in most eager interest, to his account of his new system for the religious supervision of ships' crews, and displayed her thorough comprehension of his recent article in the *Contemporary Review*.

Luncheon over, she carried off the Bishop and his wife and Mr. Challoner in a landau from a livery stable, and drove them about on to the Pincio, and up and down the Corso, in the sight of the city, which was in itself sufficient to silence slanderous tongues for a twelvemonth; and, bowing to her friends in the streets, with the shovel-hat in the front seat before her, felt she could go to as many masked balls as ever she liked with impunity.

Then she went to tea with the Bishop and his wife, at their rooms in the Piazza di Spagna, and met many English dignitaries and dowagers, and many demure spinsters, to whom she talked of all her great Scotch cousins, and told them the dear Hebrides had taken Villa Adriana, outside Porta Pia, and offered her assistance in a lottery for the building of another Protestant church within the gates, for which they were petitioning the Government. After that, having bored herself to death with estimable energy and endurance (for the root of her success lay in never showing that she was wearied), she justly thought she had earned her rest and recreation, and told her husband to go home without her, which he did obediently, and she lay back in her landau on the cushions so lately ecclesiastically sanctified, and laughed till she cried, and lighted a dozen cigarettes, and called for Ioris at his own house, and had a gay little dinner with him and three or four pets of hers, who accompanied her afterwards to the Capranica Theatre, and saw one of the wittiest and least decorous of the popular comedies, and amused herself vastly, and went homeward singing snatches of airs in chorus, and so upstairs into the Turkish room, where she sang more songs, with the guitar on her knee, and drank black coffee, and smoked, till the room was one dun-coloured cloud such as was wont to hide from mortal eyes the tender hours of Jupiter.

Thus did she make her grave bow in the face of her Bona Dea, and dance her mirthful capers behind her, in one and the same day, and make the best of both worlds, and smoke her cigar at both ends.

CHAPTER IX.

It was four by the clock when Ioris found himself free to walk home across the intense blackness and the brilliant whiteness of Roman shadows and Roman moonlight.

He drew his sables about him with a low sigh of relief as the porter closed the door behind him; he looked up at the stars, lighted a cigar, and paced homeward thoughtfully.

He was so used to it all that he had ceased to think about it, but this night it had bored him: the songs heard five hundred times, the furtive glances that told so old a story to him, the jests, the inquiries, the insistent passion—it was all so tiresome, and he was glad to get away from it and be by himself quiet in the mild moonlit winter's night.

To Ioris, Nature had been kind, and Chance had been cruel.

He was tall and slender of form, with a delicate dark head, and a look of thoughtful and reticent calm which would have made the white monastic robes of a Dominican or the jewelled costume of a Louis Quinze courtier suit him better than the dress of the world that he wore. People looked at him far oftener than they did at still handsomer men.

It was one of those faces which suggest the romance of fate, and his eyes under their straight classic brows and their drooping lids could gaze at women with a dreaming amorous meaning that would pour trouble into the purest virgin soul.

Women never saw him for the first time without thinking of him when he had passed from sight. He had the charm of arousing at a first glance that vague speculative interest which one felt so easily grows little by little into love. Ioris was a man whom women always loved when he wished them to do so.

He was a Roman and a patrician: the purest blood and the most ancient lineage were his; they were all that remained to him of the vanished greatness of a race which had been second to none through a thousand centuries for valour, power, and all noble repute: he had fought, he had travelled, he had studied; he had the taste of an artist and the manner of a courtier; he looked like a picture, and he moved like a king. He had an old estate and an income slender in comparison with his rank, but sufficient for his habits, which, though elegant, still were simple. He loved his country and his dependents, and was happy in the life of an Italian noble, which is, perhaps, as lovely a life as there is to be led in this world. Alas! in an evil hour of his destiny the bold eyes of a new-comer, roving over the crowds of a Court

ball, had fallen on him, and his last hour of peace had then struck.

When the Lady Joan first arrived from the East, life seemed to her grown very dull. It was before the season had begun; the air was heavy, the streets empty; she missed the red burning skies, she missed the fast desert scampers, she missed the noisy bazaars, she missed the camping out; she felt dull and depressed: the men around had not yet become her brothers; she was in that mood which, when an Englishman is in it, makes men of other nationalities say to him "that he wants something to kill." Lady Joan wanted something to kill, and she found it.

At various balls when the season came on she noticed a man who did not notice her. There was something in his slender grace and his delicate face, in his unrevealing eyes, in his cold glance, which fascinated her. What fascinated her much more was, that though when he bowed to other women his eyes were amorously soft and his laughter light and gay, his gaze if it chanced to light on her was chill and indifferent, and at all times he avoided her. In vain did she drift near him constantly, cast countless glances after him, waltz furiously past him, and flirt with his best friends; he took no notice of her, and seemed rather repelled than attracted. One evening she who was not easily baffled insisted that he should be presented to her. He tried to avoid his fate, but it was written; a friend, who cared more to please the imperious and handsome stranger from the banks of the Enphrates than to please him, entrapped him; escape was no longer possible without looking like a boor. He was brought, bitterly against his will, to her side: he was called Ireneo, Prince Ioris.

"She makes one think of a snake," he thought. Some fancies of the Nile had entangled themselves with this new acquaintance in his mind. She was everything that he disliked in woman; her voice seemed harsh to him, her gestures rough, her attitudes masculine, her look unfeminine. She had none of the soft charms of womanhood; she danced ill, she dressed ill; she was distasteful to him: she saw all that well enough, but she resolved to avenge it.

She bade him call on her: he could do no less. When he entered she seemed not to hear; her head was resting on her hands; she turned surprised and embarrassed; there were tears in her eyes; she spoke vaguely and hurriedly of *quelques amertumes*; she hinted a *vie incomprise*; she let fall a murmur of a *mariage mal assorti*.

It startled him.

To be astonished is in a sense to be interested.

This woman, who waltzed so madly, rode so recklessly, and looked like a young black-browed *bersagliere*, was not happy at heart—had a brutal husband—sighed restlessly for a happiness

she had never known—concealed weariness and bitterness under the mask of a defiant courage and gaiety!

The strange contrast of it arrested his attention, and she appeared to place confidence in him—a stranger who had for six months persistently avoided her—in a manner which perplexed as much as insensibly it flattered him. Men are always inclined to be pitiful to the woes of a woman when they are not woes which they themselves have caused. They will stone away without mercy a woman whom they themselves have wounded, but for the victim of another man they are quick to be moved to tenderness and indignation.

The Lady Joan, knowing this, having in vain tried all other sorceries, took her attitude as a victim. Whenever she found any one whom she thought would believe it, she always became the victim of Mr. Challoner and of the rapacity of her family, which had sacrificed her to a Brute because he was a Cræsus. To be sure the riches were all left behind in the sands of Abana and Pharphar, and the brute was the most well-trained and patiently-enduring of *maris complaisants*; but at this time the Brute was absent in London, and her listener had never seen him, and of Cræsus he was not incredulous, because an Englishman is always supposed to be one, and on the Continent is given an unlimited credit on account of that supposition, of which he seldom fails to avail himself.

When Ioris left her presence that day she had gained her point with him so far that, although she still half-repelled, she had begun to startle and interest him, his thoughts were busy with her—a woman need ask no more. As for herself, the Lady Joan's pulses stirred as they had not done for many a day; the dulness and apathy that she had felt passed off her like a vapour; she had wanted something to kill, and she scented prey. Besides which she was already in love.

Her spirits rose at once; she rang and ordered her horse. She rode with great courage and skill; she flashed past Ioris like a meteor out of the gates to the open country. As he bowed to her in the sunset he mused to himself:

“Why did she confide in me?”

Reason and vanity both could give him but one answer.

There was a woman at that time who loved him well, and whom he had loved well also—a countrywoman of his own. As he went to her, that night, he thought of those new strange darkling brows; as he sat with her, she—whose stars and sun and heaven and earth he was—felt that his attention wandered and that his mind was absent.

When a woman like the Lady Joan is in love, escape for him with whom she is in love is not easy.

“She has the stride of a carabineer, the feet of a contadina,

the teeth of a gipsy, the eyes of a tigress, the manners of a fish-woman," he told himself: and thought so; and yet, do what he would, he could not forget the strange glitter of those eyes; he could not forget how he had seen this self-willed, daring, sun-browned rider from the Syrian Desert melted to tears and wooing his sympathy with hesitating words of confidence.

The very strangeness of the contrast heightened its enigma for him.

Long rides in the rosy summer hours, with the wind blowing over the flower-filled grasses; early mornings, when he carried her knapsack for her in breezy pilgrimages to forest sanctuaries or mountain heights; lonely evenings, when the guitar was got out and the people's *ritornelli* tried over to his teaching, with gay laughter and amorous gaze to suit the words; late nights, when the Turkish tobacco was smoked, and the Roman songs sung, and the Persian sequins glittered in the lamp-light on her dusky braids, and the shining fierce eyes glistened with fervid invitation and flashed with eloquent meaning—one by one these succeeded each other with feverish rapidity until their work was done, and he was whirled into a fancy as sensual as her own, if not as durable, and lost himself in it for a brief while, and woke to find the chains fast-locked about him and his place assigned to him for good and aye in the triangle of the Casa Challoner.

Of course gradually he became aware that the Croesus was a gentleman not too well off, and very fond of speculating in whatever chanced to come in his way, from railway companies to Capo di Monte cups, and that the Brute was a person who would dine with him every evening and be shrouded amicably behind a newspaper after dinner; who would grumble and quarrel certainly about the soup or the salt or the servants, but who would never by any chance ask him if he had a preference for pistols or swords.

Of course little by little he became aware that a good many fictions had been spread out for his attraction, and that if any one were a victim in the household it certainly was not the Lady Joan. Little by little he saw all this byplay and all the shifts and straits with which the Casa Challoner was kept straight in the world's eyes; and he grew so used to the inventiveness of his mistress that when she did chance to speak the truth he never believed her. But to all this knowledge he only came by such slow degrees that he grew used to it as it stole upon him; and in her passion for him he could not choose but believe—it was too jealous, too violent, too exacting, too terribly ever-present with him, for him to have a chance of doubting its vitality and reality.

There were times when his own exhausted passion roused itself, with infinite effort and with a weariness that was almost

repugnance, to respond to the unending insistence and undying fires of hers.

A woman who is ice to his fire, is less pain to a man than the woman who is fire to his ice. There is hope for him in the one, but only a dreary despair in the other. The ardours that intoxicate him in the first summer of his passion serve but to dull and chill him in the later time.

Ioris, in certain passing moods, would think almost with a shudder, "Heavens! will she insist on these transports for ever?"

This evening, walking homeward, he felt tired of the day, tired of the evening. He had had so many like them.

He knew the songs by heart and the smiles too. The routine of the hours, so carefully balanced between the decorum that imposed on the little world she studied, and the amusement and abandonment that were the real delights of her nature, seemed to him wearisome and vapid. It was always the same thing. She could take a genuine zest in the small Tartufferies of the tea-parliament; she could take a sincere delight in the jokes of the Capranica and the jests at Spillman's. She had this supreme advantage—she loved the life she led in both its extremes. But he did not.

He had a contempt for the conventicle; he was tired of the theatre. He bore his share in both psalm and play because he had grown into the habit of doing anything that she dictated to him. But all the same he had too much good taste not to be tired of both.

He walked through the dusky shadows and across the wide white squares to his own little house on the bank of the river, down by the Piazza del Gesù. He let himself in, took the lamp that was burning in the entrance, and went up the staircase to his own favourite chamber.

The house was cumbered with busts and bronzes, and rolls of old tapestries, and rococo bits of china and carving, and broken fragments of sculpture. For it was in a manner the warehouse of the Casa Challoner, which could itself not decorously be strewn about with more things than would look natural.

He went up to his own room and threw his coat off and lighted a cigar. It was a pretty room, looking on a garden that in spring was green with lemon and orange trees, and had an old statue or two in it, and a wide-arched loggia hung with creeping plants.

There was one portrait on the wall among landscapes and weapons and etchings, relics of the time when he had been an art-student at San Luc's and a duellist in grey old Pisa.

It was a portrait with an Egyptian profile, a classic head, a cruel jaw, and a hard mouth; he glanced up at it and turned away with a sort of restless impatience at its presence there.

Indeed, it had no place of right there—being, as it was, the portrait of another man's wife. But it was not this scruple which troubled or distracted him. It had hung there for several seasons.

What made him feel impatient of it now was, that for the first time it occurred to him, with a chill, that throughout all the days of his life he would never be able to escape from the staring watchfulness of those menacing eyes.

He was like one of those magicians of fable who, having mastered spirits of good and evil for many a year in safety, at last summons from the nether world a spirit that defies his spells to banish it again, and abides with him, to his misery, growing stronger than himself.

This night he turned restlessly and uneasily from the gaze of the portrait, moved his lamp so that the picture was left in darkness, and took out from his bookshelves some old numbers of a great European review. He searched through them until he found certain poems signed "Etoile."

He sat reading until the lamp grew dim and the sparrows in his garden below began to twitter at the approach of dawn.

"Can it be possible that this woman has never known what love is?" he said to himself as he shut the book and went to his bed.

The morning had risen.

CHAPTER X.

"I wonder what Voightel has told her?" thought the Lady Joan to herself on the morrow.

She felt a little uneasy: just as she had used to feel under the gaze of the great explorer's green spectacles on the housetop in Damascus, when the champagne was in the ice-pails and Mr. Challoner in his counting-house, and Voightel's little cynical, self-complaisant chuckle had sounded scarcely more welcome to her than if it had been the hiss of a cobra. She was uncomfortably conscious that Voightel knew much more of her than was agreeable to herself; besides, he was the bosom friend of that brilliant politician who had been trustee to her marriage settlements.

"I dare say she knows everything, and I'm sure she's good for nothing," she reflected at noonday; thereupon she dressed herself

in her best, took out of her wardrobe with her Astracan furs an admirable manner—frank but not free, blunt but not bold, cordial and good-natured and high-spirited—which she kept on hand for people with whom it was not necessary to don the meeting-house clothes, yet with whom it might be dangerous to dress quite *en débardeur*; and thus arrayed, with her pleasantest smile shining honestly in her grey eyes, she drove herself across the city to the old palace by the Colonna Gardens, in which the Comtesse d'Avesnes had established herself on the previous day; and finding her at home, would take no denial from Etoile, but insisted on the friend of her father and of dearest Voightel passing the rest of the day with her. It would be such a charity. She was quite alone, she said: Mr. Challoner was gone to Orbetello, and Io—poor Io—was obliged to bore himself all day at the Court with some newly-arrived foreign potentate.

"Of course she must have led the very deuce of a life, but nobody would ever think it to look at her," the Lady Joan reflected in perplexity as she surveyed her guest at her own breakfast-table. She was quite honest in her conviction. Given a woman with every opportunity to—amuse—herself, why, of course the woman had—amused—herself: every idiot knew that.

She did not like her guest. She could not make her out; she was irritated by her own suspicions that Voightel had told her disagreeable things; and though she liked patronising artists she did not care for artists of European celebrity when they were of her own sex, and were as proud as Lucifer, as she said angrily to herself, and looked round her rooms with eyes that seemed to her to detect at a glance the china that was mended, the canvases that were restored, the antiquities that had been made yesterday, and the certosina that had been glued together last week. Nevertheless she made herself charming; got out some really good things, which she was never without in case any real connoisseur should happen to call; and over the plump quails, and light wines, of her breakfast-table was the very model of a clever, good-humoured, candid, and hospitable hostess.

No one could play the part better than she when she liked; and Etoile, won by her cordial good humour and bright intelligence, reflected that Voightel, when he was prejudiced could be very unjust. Great men can be so, as well as little ones, sometimes.

"Dear old Voightel!" said the Lady Joan fervently. "I am so fond of him. People call him a cynic, but I'm sure his heart's in the right place. He was like a father to me in Damascus."

She had hated Voightel; as a woman who loves adventures, yet wishes nobody to know that she has any, does hate a grim old ironical onlooker, with keen eyes watching through his

spectacles and the raciest humour in Christendom, on whom all her prettiest fictions and sharpest devices fall harmless as feathers on bronze. But she had always met Voightel with both hands extended and the pleasantest of smiles. "Ah, *mir zu liebe, mein Herr!*" she would always say to him with the frankest delight when they crossed each other in any of the cities of Europe; and Voightel would go and dine with her and enjoy his dinner—as, indeed, there was no reason that he should not; for it does not matter if you think very ill things of a woman, so long as she is good-looking and makes a fuss with you.

"She would pounce on me like a tiger-cat if she dared," Voightel would think to himself as she smiled on him and gave him mocha, Turkish fashion, and prepared with her own hands for him his water-pipe;—and it tickled his fancy so much that he was always at his pleasantest with her; so that though she knew that he did not believe in her one bit, she was quite sure that he liked her.

So runs the world away; and so, amongst all the spiders cheating all the flies, a spider makes a meal for another spider now and then.

Etoile, as she heard Voightel's praises, felt almost guilty for the guilty and absent man who had called this ardent and grateful friend of his the "Prose of Rome."

Before she could reply there entered the Count Mimo Burletta, plump and busy, his mouth full of new scandals and his hands full of new laces.

"Am I in your way? Is that your tailor?" asked Etoile of her hostess, in perfect good faith, not recognising him by daylight, and only seeing the filmy heaps of the laces he carried.

Lady Joan laughed, frowned, whispered hurriedly that he was an old friend—very poor—snubbed the ill-timed visitor and his laces, and dismissed him; then, thinking better of it, ran after him into the ante-room and consoled him, and told him, with a smile, that the Comtesse d'Avesnes had taken him for a man-milliner.

"*Maladetta sia!*" swore Burletta, dropping his laces in his rage, till he looked like a large fat ram dropping its fleece. "*Maladetta sia!*"

"With all my heart!" laughed the Lady Joan, and returned to her drawing-room, taking a piece of yellow Venetian point with her as a reason for her absence in the ante-room.

"A collar of Marino Faliero's," she said as she entered. "Isn't it interesting? Perhaps the very one he was executed in—who knows?"

"Who knows, indeed?" said Etoile, with a smile. "But why not say Desdemona's at once? It would be more poetic."

The Lady Joan threw the lace aside crossly. She had a

suspicion that Voightel's friend was laughing at her, and she did not like to be laughed at; moreover, she preferred people who believed in Faliero, or in anything else that she might choose to tell them.

She had some odds and ends of real art and real history jumbled together in her brain like the many-coloured snips and shreds in a tailor's drawer in Spain. But they were all tumbled about pell-mell, and the wrong colours came up at the wrong time; and she had so unfortunate a preference for always dragging in the very biggest names and the very grandest events upon every occasion, that her adorer, Mimo Burletta, who really was learned in such matters, was constantly made very nervous by her blunders.

"La Challoner is beautiful, noble, chaste—a very pearl and queen of women," he would say in his enthusiasm about her. "But she makes one little, very little mistake—a pot baked yesterday is always a vase of Maestro Georgio's; all her fiddles are Cremonas; all her sprigged china is Saxe, all her ugly plates are Palissy's; all her naked people are Michael Angelo's; all her tapestries are Gobelin; all her terra-cottas are Pentelic Marbles. Now, that is a mistake, you know; the world is too little for so very much treasure. She forgets that she makes her diamonds as cheap as pebbles. But she is a divine creature for all that," would the loyal Mimo always cry in conclusion.

At this moment she looked at the lace with regret. It was very yellow, very full of holes, and not very much coarser than what the women make every day along the Riviera. Why would her guest not believe in it?

"Would you mind driving me about to-day?" she said, glancing at the clock, reflecting that she might as well get something in return for this breakfast. "The ponies are tired. Mine?—no, they're not mine exactly: they're Io's; but of course I have them whenever I like. Yes, they're nice little beasts—little Friuli nags—fast as steam and surefooted as goats. They're very useful. Will you drive me? Thanks. Perhaps you will go with me to a few studios, if you don't mind? Of course it will bore you. You'll find it all second-rate, but to have your opinion will be such a treat to me and such an honour to them! Are you ready?"

Of course she carried her point and got into her guest's carriage and began a round of visits. She was not quite the Lady Joan of the bib-and-tucker, nor was she quite the Lady Joan of the loup-and-domino, but the same adroit mixture of the two, that she had been throughout luncheon.

She was sincere, in her eager invitation; she had a genuine zest in exhibiting any celebrity in her companionship. It gave her a *cachet* of talent. She liked to affect artistic society, her

family had always done so; only, where they had had all that was greatest in all Europe to choose from, she had to take such offshoots of intellectual power as she could obtain. Sculptors who thought it high art to imitate in stone, schoolboys and sucking babes, cloth trousers and silk gowns; painters who cut colour like butter and like butter spread it with a knife, then called the mass a chord in colour or a prelude in carmine; clever writers who appraised their age aright, and saw that it needed not high purpose nor high thought, and trained their gifts accordingly, and, instead of dying like Keats or Buckle, took good incomes from great newspapers, and were not too clever for their peace or price—these and their like she would get round her, and make them useful to her in many ingenious ways.

But when a great fame came within her reach, she grasped it eagerly, and always was the first to ask it out to dinner.

These pastiles of art and intellect burned in her rooms gave it a fine aroma, and she liked people to run about and say, "I met Pietra Infernale there last night; he means to have his illustrated *Furioso* ready by New Year;" or, "I dined at the Challoners', to see the Russian novelist, Sacha Silchikoff—wicked, if you like, but then how witty!" or, "I lunched yesterday with Lady Joan, and met Tom Tomans: he says there is no art nowadays in the R.A.—nothing but millinery and nursery elegiacs."

This kind of thing gave her house a smell of the Muses and the Graces, and took off any possible likeness it might otherwise have had to a *bric-à-brac* shop. Therefore, having now secured the friend of Voightel for all the remaining daylight of a fine mild afternoon, she drove up and down many streets, and went in and out many studios; smoked a cigarette here and there; and finally, at five o'clock, thought it better to wind up with a little *tableau* of respectability and begged to stop before an old dark house, in an old dark quarter.

"I must make you know my dear friends the Scrope-Stairs," she said, entreatingly. "It's their day, and I promised I would bring you if I could. You won't mind coming, to oblige me? I've told them so much about you. They're such dear, good, clever people; and they're dying to see you—dying!"

With which she went through the dusky doorway and began to mount steps innumerable and very steep and dark. Etoile followed her, unwilling to seem discourteous in such a trifle, and willing to please Lord Archie's daughter when she could.

"I've told Io to meet me here. The Scrope-Stairs are so fond of him," said the Lady Joan as she clambered up with agility to the fourth floor. "Oh yes—it is an awful height;

but they are so very ill off, poor dear people. Dear old Lord George managed to make ducks-and-drakes of five fortunes."

She interrupted herself to put aside a dingy tapestry, and led the way through ill-lit passages to a large, dim, naked-looking chamber, where there were congregated in solemn congress some forty or fifty ladies of that age once described as somewhere between twenty and sixty, whose centre of attraction was a tea-table, about which they revolved as planets round a sun.

"How *do* you do, dears?" cried Lady Joan, kissing a great many of them one after another with ardent effusion. "Is Io come? No? Oh, just like him! Ah, I beg your pardon; how careless I am! Yes, I *have* persuaded her, you see. Let me present you to my friend the Comtesse d'Avesnes. You know her best as Etoile. Allow me——"

Lady Joan saw an electric shock of amazement, a nervous thrill of curiosity mingled with terror, palpitate through all her assembled friends at the name of Etoile—such a tremor of trepidation as thrills through a dovecote when in the blue sky hovers a hawk.

She enjoyed it amazingly.

Though so careful to conciliate Mrs. Grundy she cordially detested that august personage, and loved to "tie a cracker to her tail," as she phrased it, whenever she could do so with impunity.

"So honoured, so enchanted, so *more* than flattered! For years you have been our idol!" murmured the youngest of the Scrope-Stair sisters in a twitter of excitement, whilst old Lord George wandered in and made his dignified old Regency bow, and put his glasses to his dim eyes and turned a pretty compliment for sake of Etoile.

"But will not people think it a little *odd* to see *her* in *our* house?" murmured the youngest sister, Marjory, a thin, eager person, with a fringe of hair above a nervous face; whilst her father occupied Etoile. Lady Joan filled her mouth with tea-cake.

"Oh no, dear; she goes everywhere; she's hand-and-glove with Princess Vera. Of course there are very queer stories; but you know I'm never censorious. Where on earth can Io be?"

Marjory Scrope coloured; she always did so at a certain name.

"We have not seen him yet to-day," she murmured. "As for your friend, I am delighted. Only I thought Mrs. Middleway looked a little—a little—astonished. But you know best always, darling Joan; and any one dear Lord Archie recommends——"

Mrs. Middleway was the wife of one of those Anglican clergy-

men whose flocks are all the straying Protestant sheep, black and white, who dance their cotillons, enjoy their masquerades, play their roulette, drink their pick-me-ups, propitiate heaven with their bazaars, and shriek at trumpery French plays, all over Italy in the winter-time, and of whom the Roman shepherd, or the Neapolitan beggar, or the Tuscan vinedresser, staring sullenly at them as they fly by on horseback, will generally mutter, "Non sono Christiani."

Mrs. Middleway was a large, faded, shabby woman, with two daughters to marry. She was extremely particular as to whom she visited, and had a very small income. She would stay at Fiordelisa in the summer, and if any one hinted that, "Well, yes—well, was it not rather—rather strange, you know?" Mrs. Middleway would reply, "The dear Challoners? Oh! what a cruel censorious world we live in! As if the very openness of the friendship were not sufficient guarantee! Why, Lady Hebrides lunched there yesterday—I met her!"

But Mrs. Middleway being the soul of propriety, and having two daughters to marry, looked askance at the entrance of a celebrated person, whose name she was inclined to think synonymous with Tophet; wondered what that brown velvet gown had cost, drew herself up a little stiffer than usual, and murmured to her neighbour that that sweet Lady Joan was always so imprudently kind-hearted; Lady Joan, judging by her own noble self, never would believe there could be anything wrong anywhere.

The neighbour, who was a very solemn spinster, with blue spectacles, who had written a very learned book upon the Privileges and Penalties of the Vestals, murmured back that society was so mixed nowadays that it was really dangerous to enter it at all; one never knew whom one might not be exposed to meeting.

"Ah, no, you may well say so. There is no line drawn," said the clergyman's wife, with a sigh, as she broke a tea-cake. "What *can* society be without a line?"

And she smoothed her shabby silk gown, and, good Christian though she was, could not help disliking a woman who wore brown velvet, silver-fox fur, and silk-embroidered cashmeres, and had old Mechlin lace at the hem of her skirt.

To the Countess of Hebrides such vanities were permissible; they were, like other evidences of the favouritism of Providence, not to be questioned in justice or propriety. But on only an artist!

"When one thinks how they *must* have been purchased!" she murmured to the spinster who had written the learned book on the penalties of the Vestals.

The spinster shook her head.

"Very wrong of Lady Joan to have brought her," she said, in a severe and choleric whisper. "*Here* one always was safe."

"Dear Lady Joan! she is so imprudent and so good-natured!" sighed Mrs. Middleway, and had her feelings further harrowed by a glimpse of the old Mechlin lace of the *balayeuse* underneath the immoral brown velvet of Etoile.

The glimpse she got of the Mechlin *balayeuse* filled her with a kind of savage pain. Real old Mechlin!—sweeping the dust! These were the kinds of things that made it at times almost hard even for a chaplain's wife to believe in a beneficent Creator.

Meanwhile Etoile, unconscious of the emotions she excited, smiled on the antiquated homage of Lord George, wondered why she had been brought to this parliament of dames, and remained as indifferent to the stare of the fifty ladies as she was to the crowd on the Pincio, or to the *monstrari digito* at all times. The millelack of tongues grew very quiet round her; the tea did not circulate briskly, the muffins were not buttered with honeyed welcome; they did not like to talk before her; she had come from Paris, and had the reputation of a wit. Altogether she made them very uncomfortable.

"So kind of Lady Joan," whispered the clergyman's wife. "And so kind of the Stairs—they always *were* kindness itself—but it is a pity, because to *this* house every one has always thought they were *quite* safe in bringing their daughters. Yes, a mistake certainly, though well meant, no doubt; but when one has young girls *can* one be too careful?"

"Delighted to have had the honour of receiving so much genius and so much brilliancy into my sad old house," said quivering old Lord George, with a bow of Brummell's time, and his hand on his heart. He was a feeble old man, but had been very handsome in his time, and still knew a woman to his taste when he saw one. Lady Joan was not to his taste: only he never dared say so in his daughters' hearing.

"So charmed to have had such an honour, and any use we can be,—and we may be allowed to call, may we not?—and pray remember our Thursdays—every Thursday till June—though we may hardly hope that you will deign," etc., etc., said Marjory in her most fervent manner, her beads, and her trinkets, and her spare figure, and her little rings of hair all eager with courtesy.

Under these cordial valedictions Etoile went to her carriage wondering why she had been taken to these excellent folks.

Lady Joan's brow was stormy; it was half-past five, and her friend, the Prince Ioris, had not come.

She loved to take him there—in the first place, because it wearied him to death, and in the second because it amused her extremely to stride into that circle of "goody-goodies," as she

termed them, with her hands in her pockets and her Prince at her heels. The incongruity of it tickled her fancy, and she knew how well it served her for all these matrons and spinsters to cry in chorus to any calumniators that she might have, "Oh! the purest friendship! The most innocent intercourse! Why, those excellent Scrope-Stairs receive them *together*—as if they ever *would*, if there *were*," etc., etc.

The Scrope-Stairs sisters were charmed to have him brought there at any price; he was their one court-card, their one riband of grace and honour. The "sex of valour" was never represented in their rooms save by some clergyman, or missionary, or unwary traveller caught in his ignorance, or on occasion by Mr. Silverly Bell, if he had any particular enemy that he desired to drown in the teapot, with Mrs. Grundy to say the *De Profundis* over the defunct.

Lord and Lady George Scrope-Stairs, with their daughters, were the chief mainstay and prop to that Temple of All the Virtues which Lady Joan had set herself to build. They were, indeed, very poor, but in compensation they were so eminently, so pre-eminently—respectable!

Not because their names were in "Debrett" and "Burke"—plenty of scamps are in both, who will hurt you very much if you are seen with them—but because from their fourth floor there went out an eternal odour of the very severest morality.

To have sipped of the tea from their teapot was to have been baptised with the waters of respectability for life, and to have eaten of their muffins was to have been sealed with the seal of purity for all time. True, their teapot was terrible as the cauldron of Maebeth's weird sisters, and hissed till youth and innocence, excellence and genius and honour were all stewing, cold, drowned things, in its steam. But what of that? Mrs. Grundy does not mind a little scandal—if you will only whisper it.

Lord George had been a dandy and a beau when the century and himself were both young; he had had big fortunes and spent them all, and had lived many years in exile, a sad and broken man; shivering by his chilly stove, and tottering out when the day was fine to have a mild little joke, when his daughters were out of hearing and any chance word awoke the old memories in him, as a trumpet-call wakes the spirit in the worn-out charger waiting death wearily between the waggon's shafts.

In his own house his daughters cowed him; they were iron to him though wax to the rest of the world; taking in the world's eternal comedy those indispensable but subordinate rôles known in stage-talk as "utility parts."

They were plain, *passées*, perfidious; but the people they

toadied, and the friends they flattered, rather liked them the better for this.

If anybody wanted a shoogirl looked after, a bore taken off their hands, a disagreeable errand done, or a train met on a rainy day, there were the Scrope-Stairs to do it.

Provided you were only quite a proper person, you could always have a Scrope-Stair to do what you wanted—from ringing your bell to slandering your enemy, from pouring out your tea to escorting your coffin. Their usefulness was of an elasticity quite inexhaustible, and their ingenuity in consolatory sophisms was as great as that of the chamberlain of Marie Leczinska, who, when she longed to play cards on the day of a funeral, assured her that the game of *piquet* was deep mourning. And, considering what a comfort they were, the Scrope-Stairs were not expensive—some drives, some dinners, some visits to you in the summer, some boxes at the opera in the winter—with these trifles these treasures were secured.

Lady Joan, whose unerring eye for her own advantage never misled her, had discerned the capabilities and the advantages of friendship with these excellent young persons when first she had wintered in Italy. She saw that they had not, like her, the power to make all men their brothers, but that they were exactly what was wanted to induce Society to let her enjoy herself with her brothers. Determined, like the spirited woman she was, to dance her Carmagnole over the conventionalities, she saw the necessity of having somebody to swear that she was only curtsying, and not dancing at all. So she instantly rushed into devoted friendship, kissed them all at every meeting, and wrote them a dozen times a week sugary little notes beginning “Dearest darling,” and ending “With a thousand loves.”

It was not the style that suited her best, but she could do it when it was wanted.

This effervescence had cooled down a little by this time, but it had left a valuable residuum; the froth was gone, but the wine remained.

The Scrope-Stairs had found out what her “thousand loves” were worth, but they kept their knowledge to themselves; and, pouring out her tea on their Thursdays, continued to kiss and be kissed.

The loyalty of the Scrope-Stairs (whom the profane jesters of Society would call the Sweep-Stairs) was quite priceless in its unutterable value to the Casa Challoner. Indeed, but for the Scrope-Stair friendship Society might perhaps never have been friendly. But these young persons were so well-born, so decorous, so eminently estimable, so sternly respectable, and so stiffly irreproachable, that they really could have made Society accept even odder things than Fiordelisa, and stranger things

than the Lady Joan, with her hands in her coat-pockets and her lovers behind her, striding in to a clergyman's tea-party.

They were, it is true, very jealous, very curious, very cruel, could slander viciously, toady rapaciously, and injure irreparably; but these were trifles, and were, indeed, quite lost sight of under the throng of amiable qualities which they developed for people richer than themselves. Their moral qualities were their strong point; they were armed *cap-à-pie* in every kind of virtue; they had even charity—when they were paid very well for it.

The old folks did not very cordially join in the charity. They belonged to an old-fashioned school, and did not understand the comprehensiveness of modern friendship, which means anything anybody likes, from rapturous love to deadly hate.

But their money was spent, their daughters were formidable, their home was dreary, and so they obediently did as they were told, and the old courtier put on his faded red riband to grace Lady Joan's respectable parties, and the old wife carried her knitting-needles and lambswool on to the terrace at Fiordelisa; and all was as it should be, and their venerable names and persons were as towers of strength built up beside the Casa Challoner.

A bolder woman would not have cared for these things, and a sillier woman would not have known their value; but Lady Joan was not above using these trifles and turning them to good account. Even an old red riband, and a pair of knitting-needles, she knew were not weapons to be despised in her battle of life.

Lady Joan was like that well-trained elephant which can at will root up an oak or pick up a pin; and Lady Joan knew that there are many more pins than oaks, and that a pin stamped on too hastily may lame even an elephant for life. So nothing was too small for her, wise woman that she was.

A pattern of a new pinafore for an anxious mother; a damascened scimitar lent for a *tableau vivant*; a compliment at the right minute to an ugly woman; a young baritone allowed to scream himself hoarse over her guitar; a shoddy Cræsus dazzled with the statesmen and the duchesses in her photograph book; a frank, beaming smile in the face of a bore; a pressing invitation to a nervous nonentity; a flattering deference to a wealthy pomposity; a pretty set of conventionalities put on stiff and new like her ruffs and her cuffs; a present of fruit to folks rich enough to buy up Hesperides; a loan of the pony-carriage to people who owned great studs and rare racers in Suffolk or Norfolk; nothing wasted, nothing thrown away, every one conciliated, everything remembered—herein was her success. She beamed on the old folks and the rich folks, no matter how they bored her, because they were solid as bullion, bought pictures,

and were the St. Peters of the gates of Society. And she beamed on the young ones and the poor ones, because who could tell what they might not turn out to be some day? The corporal's knapsack may hold the marshal's truncheon, and a little lad once trotted about with baskets of washed linen who lived to be King of Sweden. Thus she got her pæans sung in all stages of society, and broke down her oaks and picked up her pins and made her path clear, and endured an amount of ennui incalculable, and listened radiantly to platitudes interminable, and made herself as agreeable to poor little Doremi screaming his cadenza and talking of his theatrical future, as to solemn Sir Joseph, with the face of a pig and the art-knowledge of a butler, and a huge art gallery in England, smelling of paint and plaster, and requiring many framed acres of "Guidos, Correggios, and stuff."

Of course all this cost her trouble, unending trouble. But she kept foremost before her the final words of *Candide*: "*Il faut cultiver notre jardin.*" She had a passion-flower in her garden, of course; but her real care and culture were her cabbages.

She enjoyed her cabbages as much as her passion-flowers.

Whether she were sending her horse at racing pace across the grass that covers the dead Etruscan cities; or waltzing at topmost speed down the vast palace ball-rooms; or bargaining for old gems in dusky cellars of the Trastevere; or outwitting the Ghettos in the purchase of brocades and canopies; or smiling in the faces of haughty or witty women whom she hated; or swinging through the feathered maize to call the lazy peasants to their duties; or launching shafts of malice through her black satin vizor at the Vegliione—whatever it was that she was doing she did it with zest and force, and with a reality of enjoyment that was contagious.

Here was the secret of her success. To her nothing was little.

This temper is always popular with Society. To enjoy yourself in the world, is, to the world, the prettiest of indirect compliments.

The chief offence of the poet, as of the philosopher, is that the world as it is fails to satisfy them.

Society, which is after all only a conglomerate of hosts, has the host's weakness—all its guests must smile.

The poet sighs, the philosopher yawns. Society feels that they depreciate it. Society feels more at ease without them.

To find every one acceptable to you is to make yourself acceptable to every one.

Hived bees get sugar because they will give back honey. All existence is a series of equivalents.

"What do you think of my dear friends?" asked Lady Joan, as they drove away.

Etoile hardly knew what to say.

"No doubt they are very estimable persons," she answered. "But I admit, a society like that is hardly what I am used to. I counted thirty-eight ladies, very ill-dressed, who I am sure were all muttering *Apaga Satanás*, and most of them looked in a fierce state of warfare with a world which had failed to appreciate and—to marry them."

Lady Joan laughed.

"Oh, they're horrid old cats; I quite agree with you there. But cats scratch, you know. It's best to coax them. As for the dear Scrope-Stairs, I assure you to know them is to admire them; they are so indefatigable, so true, so charitable. I love them all so much!" she added, with an irrepressible grin on her handsome face. "Besides, you know, women are so useful—haven't you ever found that out yet?"

"No; perhaps because I want nothing of them."

Lady Joan decided in her own mind that Voightel *must* have told her everything. Voightel never had;—but conscience is a magic-lantern that throws distorted figures on any white blank-wall.

"I think you are wrong," she answered aloud, with the odd candour which sometimes characterised this woman, who perhaps had been born for better things than she had achieved. "I think you are wrong. Nobody knows what they may want. Things hinge so horribly on accident. People who used to snub Louis Napoleon thought themselves quite safe; they were always afraid he should borrow a sovereign. I knew a man who gave him a drop of sherry out of a flask in a hunting field after he had had a heavy fall one day in Leicestershire; and twenty years afterwards that very drop of sherry got the man a concession for public works that brought him in half a million of money. There!"

"But surely he gave the sherry out of good nature, not calculation?"

"Humph! I don't know. He was not the sort of man to stop his horse to pick up a farmer. At any rate he did the civil thing, and see what he got by it. Now, that is just what I mean by being civil to women. They bore you; well, they bore me. I don't deny that. But they can do one so much good—just for a drop of sherry they can get you such a big concession."

"You would make a good political leader," said Etoile, with a smile.

Lady Joan was flattered; though perhaps she would not have been so much so had she seen into her companion's thoughts.

Etoile descended at her own resting-place and sent her horses home with Lady Joan, who, when out of her hearing, had them turned in the direction of the house of Ioris.

"The Prince not home yet?" she said sharply to his servant. "Well, tell him I've been here; and tell him if he's not in at half-past seven he'll get no dinner; we shan't wait for him."

The servant bowed humbly, and in his soul prayed heaven to send his master's *dama an accidente*.

Then she had herself borne again along the twilight Corso homeward, and laughed as she lay back amongst the cushions recalling the faces of the thirty-eight matrons and virgins around the sacred sun of the tea-urn.

"How scared they looked!" she thought to herself. "Well, it may all come in useful some day."

For Lady Joan was a long-sighted woman.

When Etoile went up her wide steps into the great palace, pale and melancholy with Overbeck's frescoes, she saw a coat lined with furs lying on the couch of the antechamber, and in the dusk of her rooms, that were filled with the aromatic scent of the wood fires, and burning pine-cones, a slender hand was held out to her, and a soft melodious voice said:

"Will you forgive me that I ventured to wait for you? I could not bear to be turned away a second time."

The dark, delicate head of the Prince Ioris was seen fitfully in the gloom of the evening light.

Dinner at the Casa Challoner that night was on the table at half-past seven. The husband and wife sat down alone. Her brow was as the thunders that rest on the brow of Soracte.

At a quarter to nine Ioris entered.

"I was kept late at the Casa di Risparmio," he explained. He endeavoured to awake their interest in that excellent institution, but vainly.

Lady Joan ordered up for him the shreds of the fish and the legs of the woodcocks. Such discipline she considered to be good for him. Mr. Challoner grumbled over his claret that the sauce had been ruined by waiting ten minutes for nothing.

It was a silent repast, only varied by scolding from the top of the table, as a long dull day of rain may be varied by mutterings of thunder from on high. They had many such. Life, when it runs on three castors, seldom runs upon velvet.

She was of opinion with Sganarelle, that "*cinq ou six coups de bâtons entre gens qui s'aiment ne font que ragailhardir l'affection*."

But, like Sganarelle also, she always premised that the right to give the blows should be hers.

CHAPTER XI.

"You must come up to Fiordelisa," said the Lady Joan with much urgency, a few days later.

Prince Ioris looked uneasy and ill-pleased, but added with courteous effort: "Fiordelisa may be so happy as to interest you, perhaps, by its age and its story; its greatness has long departed."

"What can Fiordelisa be?" thought Etoile.

The Lady Joan explained, unasked, as she drove over the Campagna. She was always explaining. Explanation is a blunder usually: whoever explains is, by self-implication, in error; but she was a mistress of the art, and found it answer with most people.

She lived in a state of perpetual apology. The meeting-house clothes were a standing apology for the cakes and ale.

It half-amused Etoile as she began to perceive it, and half-disgusted her. To a woman who was utterly indifferent to what the world said of her at any time, this struggle in another to combine self-indulgence with self-justification seemed the drollest of anomalies.

"Why not be Messalina, if it please her; or why not be St. Cecilia, if she liked it?" thought Etoile. "But why pass her life trimming up wrong as right, in sipping brandy and declaring it is cold tea?"

But that was the mistake of a careless and contemptuous temper; Lady Joan knew better. She knew that it was much wiser to pass off your cognac as souchong, and that you may take as much brandy as ever you like, if only you can convince everybody else it is tea.

When Theodore Hook wanted to get drunk, not to scandalise the club he was in, he called for lemonade—the waiters knew what to bring him.

Lady Joan called for cold tea so loudly that she might have been heard from the banks of Tiber to her own old hunting grounds by Abana and Pharphar. Those who waited on her knew what to bring her. Meanwhile that overgrown club, Society, was quite sure it was only tea.

Society will believe anything rather than ever believe that Itself can be duped.

If you have only assurance enough to rely implicitly on this, there is hardly anything you cannot induce it to accept.

Her society, having once decided to believe that Lady Joan only drank cold tea, were ready to go to the scaffold in a body rather than admit that she even knew the colour of brandy.

Her society was limited, indeed ; but then it was the club she was in—the only one that mattered to her : all her dear passers-by that wanted teacups and triptychs, and all her small gentilities and freeborn republicans that asked her to dinners and dances.

Besides, her brandy would not have tasted half so good if she had not had the fun of persuading everybody else it was tea. There is an indescribable delightfulness to a certain order of minds in smuggling.

She now proceeded to explain elaborately : Fiordelisa was Ioris' old castle, but they lived there ; it helped him a little. Io was so poor ; Io was so weak ; they were so fond of him—poor Io ! without her eye over him and Mr. Challoner's counsel he would be ruined to-morrow. Yes, of course, it did aid him very much, their living there ; and they had done no end of good to the place. Such a wretched old barn as it had been when they had gone there first of all ! Nobody could imagine the trouble she took ! But then when she went in for anything she always did do it thoroughly ; not like Io—poor Io !—who would never have a centime off the estate if she did not get it for him. How she slaved over those silkworms, for instance ! such beastly-smelling things as they were ; and she scarcely stirred out of the house for three months, she had to watch them so ; but then she made three hundred pounds nearly by the raw silk in the year ; and only think what three hundred pounds meant to poor Io ! Thus she discoursed, whipping the ponies. She was so used to making the discourse that it ran off her tongue like her raw silk off the reels of the winder. More or less varied, according to her auditors, it did duty to a thousand listeners in the twelve-month's time, and induced Mrs. Grundy to submit to Fiordelisa, and even sometimes to visit there.

"The place was quite poverty-stricken when we came," she said, with a cut of the whip to the pony Pippo. "When we knew him first he was on the brink of ruin ; *we* pulled him straight. Through extravagance?—oh no, weakness. Io's as weak as water—give his head away if he'd got nothing else to give. Just like St. Martin and his cloak. He is like a child about business, too ; a baby would wind him round its finger ; he can't say no. If it wasn't for *me* he'd maintain all the ague-shaking souls of the Agro Romano, I'm sure he would."

"Is he duly grateful to you?"—Etoile, lying back in the carriage, began to pity the absent man vaguely.

Lady Joan shot a glance at her.

"Oh, I don't know," she muttered, a little sullenly. "He knows he couldn't keep straight without *me*, if you mean that.

We've spent a great deal on the place too; but then we've got very fond of it. I've made three new *vignas* this year; got my vines out from Portugal. I grubbed up an old garden and planted it with Xeres. I shall make sherry in three summers more."

"And if your friend ever marry?" said Etoile, with the indifference she felt, only hazarding a natural conjecture.

The Lady Joan's eyes flashed as steel does in the rays of the sun.

"Marry!" She drew her breath and set her teeth, but in another moment she smiled.

"Ah, yes, I do so wish he would, if he married *properly*. But, you see, poor Io—well, he's very silly about *me*; thinks there's nobody like me, and all that. But it's all nonsense. I'm always telling him not to be a goose."

"He lives in hopes of Mr. Challoner's euthanasia? And yet he lets Mr. Challoner plant his vines?"

"Bother you! How much has Voightel told you?" thought the Lady Joan, with wrath in her soul; but she laughed and grinned pleasantly. She had a trick of grinning, but then she had very handsome teeth to show.

"Mr. Challoner *die*! My dear, he'll live for ever! I believe he was cut out of a tree of *lignum-vitæ*. I'm sure he looks as if he had been. By-the-by, he wanted to come to-day, but some telegrams came in and kept him—heaven be praised for all its mercies! We get rid of him in the summer, you know. He goes to the German baths somewhere or other with little Effie; and Effie's Swiss governess. Have you seen that Swiss girl? Horrid little upstart; I believe she came out of a *café-chantant* at Vevey. Mr. Challoner chose her. Of course Effie's taught to disobey *me*, and lie, and be rude in all kinds of ways that she can. Oh, my dear, you don't know half the troubles *I* have to put up with."

"And people think Mr. Challoner such an excellent man! I suppose you did also once?"

"I—I always thought him the most odious cad in the whole universe. I've never changed about *that*," responded his wife, with one of those sudden bursts of temper and truthfulness which occasionally upset all her best plans and tallest card-house of conventionalities; then, conscious of a slip of the tongue, she coloured, and was glad that Pippo took to pulling.

"Io's very unhappy about you," she said suddenly. "He declares you don't like him—is it true?"

"Not at all; he has beautiful manners. I think him an admirable *laquais de place*."

Lady Joan screamed with laughter, well pleased.

"Won't I tell him that! Poor Io! I suppose you wonder to see him about our house so much; but, you see, he's very useful to us and we're useful to him, and he's all alone at home, and so——"

"I do not wonder at all."

Lady Joan was silent. She was revolving in her mind whether it was worth while to try and impose the fiction of friendship on a woman who lived in Paris and who knew Voightel. There were persons before whom Lady Joan threw off her meeting-house clothes and danced her Carmagnole in all the frank and boisterous abandonment natural to her. She wondered whether it would be safe to do it here. Etoile made her uneasy; she could not tell what manner of woman this great artist was.

A grave, studious, contemptuous contemplation that seemed to gaze at her from the eyes of her new acquaintance worried her, and made her feel unsafe and uncertain. Like all cowards, she was occasionally nervous. Etoile made her so. She desired to conciliate her; but she did not know how to do it. She desired to blind her, but she had a restless feeling that it would not be safe to do so.

All the weapons with which she was accustomed to fence with most people, and all the ruffs and farthingales with which she arrayed herself to please the meeting-house and Mrs. Grundy, seemed all of a sudden blunt and useless, coarse and foolish. She could not take them up and put them on with the fortunate mixture of swagger and propriety common to her.

"I wish she had never come near me," she thought with a useless irritation, as she turned the ponies up the rough grassy road which led to Fiordelisa on this balmy and sunny morning of earliest winter; and she said aloud:

"I sent Io up after breakfast; he'll have everything ready, unless, indeed, he's given the luncheon to the dogs and the wine to a pack of beggars—which would be very like him," she added, with a laugh that was not easy or good-tempered, as she rattled the ponies up the sloping way between the reddening maples and the leafless vines.

Ioris came out of the wide-arched doorway to meet them as the ponies—his ponies—were pulled up before the entrance. He wore a black velvet dress; he had a broad-leafed felt hat in his hand; he had a red ribbon round his throat, and a hound at his side. He looked like an old Velasquez picture as the sun fell on his face and the depth of the shadow of the door was still behind him in the background.

"Take my furs, Io. Oh, how stupid you are!" cried the Lady Joan. "Do you know what the Comtesse d'Avesnes says of you? She says—(now, mind that basket!)—she says she thinks you are an admirable *laquais de place*!"

Ioris reddened under his delicate dark skin, but bowed low.

"I am glad that the Comtesse d'Avesnes can think that I have even so much small merit as that in me," he answered, lifting eyes of soft reproach. His eyes obeyed his will and uttered

what he wanted for him more eloquently than most men's tongues will do.

"M. le Prince," said Etoile, with a smile, as she gave him her hand, "when I see you mounted higher in the social scale, I will accredit you with it. At present—mind that basket!"

Ioris gave an impatient gesture, and Lady Joan laughed, not altogether well pleased at the imitation of her tones and her order.

"How he will hate her!" thought the Lady Joan, consoling herself with the reflection as they strolled through the house on to the terrace, with the dusky wooded hills and the heights of Rocca di Papa behind them, and, before them, beyond the now leafless vineyards and the gardens golden with orange fruit and bright with Bengal roses, the width of the green Campagna, with the sun shining on the far yellow streak that was Tiber, and the purple cloud which they knew was Rome, dusky with her many roofs and ruins.

But for once Lady Joan was mistaken: Ioris was rather inclined to hate himself.

"Do I indeed look such a fool to her?" he thought constantly as they went through the house, showing her the various old pictures, and marbles, and tapestries, and Etruscan treasures found in the soil without. The old castle had lost much of its whilom magnificence, but it was very ancient, and had a noble and honourable melancholy in it which ill-accorded with the Lady Joan's cigar-boxes and ulsters, crewel work and caricatures, coats of new paint, and panes of crude glass; it looked profaned and disturbed, and had that air of resentment at its own profanation which ancient places do seem to wear under sacrilege, as though they were sentient things.

They lunched in the dining hall, where Lady Joan had arranged all her china, pottery, porcelain, and the rest on shelves, to be handy for the eye and purse of that much-suffering and largely-spendng class of society, "the people passing through Rome."

Ioris sat at the bottom of his table, but Mr. Challoner's wife sat at the top, and gave all the orders of the day, and chattered throughout the meal of her wines and her pheasants, her fowls and her fruits. There was a portrait of the dead mother of Ioris on one of the walls. Etoile wondered that he left it there.

"Is Fiordelisa really yours?" she said suddenly to him when the Lady Joan had for a moment left them, her voice alone being heard from afar off in violent altercation with the henwife, who had let the last score of fowls be sold too cheap in the market.

"Fiordelisa!" he echoed in surprise. "Yes, certainly—it has been in my family twelve centuries."

"Mr. Challoner has a lease of it, I suppose?"

"Oh no; I would never let it."

"You lend it to them, then?"

"Lady Joan does me the honour to like to use it—yes."

"And do your people like to be scolded?"

"Oh, that is nothing; they do not mind."

"But what right has she to scold them? Because she scolds you; is that it?"

"Because she scolds everybody and everything. Some women do," said Ioris, with a shrug of his shoulders.

Etoile smiled, and the smile made him restless. It was only amusement, but he thought it contempt.

From the other side of the tall cypress hedge the voice of Lady Joan came in strong anger, high above the cackle of poultry and the shrill outcries of the peasants. In another moment she appeared in sight, a mangled mass of feathers dangling from one hand and a hunting-whip in the other.

"Why will you let that beastly dog loose?" she said to Ioris. "He has killed two of my best Brahmas. I bought them only last week—forty francs a pair, and such layers! I have told them if I catch him loose again I'll hang him."

Ioris looked up with a flush on his face. "You have never beaten *Imperator* again?"

"Haven't I?—within an inch of his life. He won't forget killing the Brahmas. What did you let him loose for? I told you he never was to be loose—great clumsy brute, breaking the plants to pieces."

"Cara Joanna! It is impossible to keep a dog always chained."

"Don't keep him at all, then. I shall hang him if I catch him loose, that's all. I have just told Pietro so, and he's sobbing like a baby, and Mariannina screaming!—I should think you heard them here. Break *Imperator's* heart? Rubbish! Break his bones, if you like. I shall if he kills my poultry. You are such an idiot, Io, about that dog."

And she went back as she came.

"Will you forgive my leaving you a second? I must look at the dog," said Ioris hurriedly, with the colour still in his cheeks.

"I will come and see him too," Etoile answered him. "But why do you let him be beaten? She can have no right to do that."

Ioris gave one of those gestures with which an Italian says, better than by all words, that what the gods will he must suffer, and their fiat is stronger than he.

They found the hound in his kennel, and he crept out timidly, and shivering still, with pain as with fear, and fawned upon his master. Ioris caressed him, kissed him, called him endearing words, and did his best to comfort him.

"But why not have sooner protected him?" thought Etoile,

watching the mutual affection of the man and the animal, and making friends with the hound herself, whilst Ioris called to his land-steward:

"Tista, will you see to this? Take care that when the Signora is here Imperator is kept always in kennel. Of course he is to be loose at all other times; and if he kill or break anything, do you replace it, and keep it out of the accounts. I will pay you for it apart. Only take care that the Signora does not see him free, and that she never hears it if he hunts anything. You understand?"

"I understand his Excellency. But in the summer?"

"There are months before that," said Ioris impatiently; and, turning to Etoile, he excused himself for giving orders before her, and asked her to come round with him to see from another point of view where Rocca di Papa hung above in the fir-woods.

"Will you not let Imperator loose to come with us?" she asked.

"I could not do that. She would not like it."

"Is the dog hers, then?"

"No, mine."

"And you cannot do as you like with your own?"

He was silent.

"I heard all your orders to your bailiff," she pursued. "Forgive me; but, instead of all that complicated arrangement with him about the dog, would it not be straighter and simpler just to say to Lady Joan that you do not allow him to be beaten, and that you always wish him to be free? If she be only a guest, how can you object?"

Ioris sighed impatiently.

"Oh, that would not do with her. You scarcely comprehend. She is so used to have her own way—I could not displease her."

"Poor Imperator! And yet you seem fond of him."

"Imperator only bears what I do."

He muttered the words low, as if they escaped from him against his will, as they reached the little path that wound up into the hills amongst the myrtle-bushes, and the tufts of tramarina, and the wild growth of oleander which made the mountain-side a blaze of rose-colour in the days of June.

"What is the secret of Fiordelisa?" Etoile wondered, as the ladies of Craig Moira had wondered before her.

Fiordelisa was the Lady Joan's fee-simple of Ioris. Had he never let her within the walls of Fiordelisa, Liberty would not have outspread its wings and fled away from him.

Fiordelisa, crowning its hillside amidst cypress woods and olive groves warm in the light of the western sun, and facing

the opal and amethyst lines of the mountains—Fiordelisa was the last bead of a long chaplet of noble strongholds once belonging to the great Princes of Ioris.

When Lady Joan had been seven months in Rome, still languid from the heats of the East, the summer in the city alarmed her. She averred that she would die of malaria, and that her lord was such a churl he would never give her the means to get a breath of fresher air.

The churl had but recently joined her, and could be represented in any colours she chose; and she, and the churl also, had breakfasted and lunched several times at that sunny solitary palace standing empty on the fair hillside, and the lust of desire for it had entered into her soul. Therefore she wept, she went into hysterics; she had even a week's fever.

Ioris laid the keys of Fiordelisa at her feet. What less could he do?

She affected reluctance; suggested danger from the wrath of the churl; but in the end relented and accepted.

It was but a dreary old place, said its master, and he sent up from the city all the modern necessities of daily life; had its mighty old chambers swept out, the wild garden put a little in order; sent his horses up there, and welcomed the wife of Mr. Challoner to a *villeggiatura*.

Figuratively, he had put handcuffs on his own wrists.

"What a madman!" thought Mr. Challoner when he heard of the arrangement; but aloud he said merely, "You are very good. Will it not bore you? No? I fear, indeed, my wife is not strong enough for travel. It is most unfortunate."

For Mr. Challoner of the unchanging countenance always bore himself to Ioris as he had done to his wife's friends in the East, with the grave face and the ceremonious manner with which one Roman augur of old addressed another augur in public.

Mr. Challoner was like Mrs. Siddons: he never left off the stage face and the stage tone even if he were only buying a yard of huckaback and inquiring if it would wash.

"Go to the castle," he said to his wife; "go to the castle, since you wish it, but take some good girl or other with you. Mind that."

And having thus made due provision for the safety of appearances, he departed for the baths in Germany, leaving his wife on the hillside—to recover her health.

People wondered at the husband's complacency. They would not have wondered if they had been able to see into his recollections. Everything is comparative. Fiordelisa, as compared with Orontes and Euphrates, Abana and Pharphar, seemed to Mr. Challoner propriety itself. He himself wondered very much

at Ioris. But this is a bad compliment that husbands will always pay their wives.

Lady Joan's eyes sparkled as she crossed the threshold. Here was an occupation of territory that meant (to her far-seeing eyes at least) an annexation for life. Like Prussia and Russia, she only wanted to get her foot once across the frontier, and the soil was hers for ever and aye. Once installed in Fiordelisa, who should live, bold enough, or shrewd enough, ever to turn her out of it?

There are some women so happily constituted that they consider that for the gifts of themselves all the treasures of earth would be scarcely recompense enough.

Lady Joan was one of these.

When he surrendered Fiordelisa he had surrendered his future into her hands.

He had not known it. But she had.

To dislodge a tenant unwilling to go is at all times difficult; the tiles must be taken off ere even law can aid. But a woman like the Lady Joan would sit still, bareheaded and fast-rooted, under the open skies till the tiles were put on again, and defy heaven and earth and all their elements to move her.

Possession is nine points of the law; and with nine points it would have been odd indeed if Lady Joan should not have managed, by hook or by crook, to obtain the tenth.

Ioris, with that touch of simplicity that a man's finest astuteness is always mingled with, imagined that he only lent Fiordelisa for a summer or two. Lady Joan laughed to herself to think how easily she had drawn away this trump card from him.

"Get *me* out!" she thought to herself. "Not when I'm once let in."

A great statesman being once asked what was the surest method of success, replied, "Immovability."

Lady Joan understood the wisdom of the saying. When she installed herself at Fiordelisa gaily as one who only bivouacs for a midsummer picnic, she hung her cashmere upon the first peg she saw in the hall.

"There is my fee-simple for life," she thought.

What can any man do against a woman who, long ere a hint be given her, has resolved that she never will take one?

Ioris, who thought of his country as Musset did—" *Que les soleils de Juin font l'amour passager*"—in the midsummer months looked forward to a romance bright and brief as the life of the fireflies amongst the corn; a midsummer madness befitting the months when the oleander burns on the world like fire, and the nightingales sing under flowering myrtles. But Lady Joan knew better.

The castle was ancient, honourable, majestic: like an old greybeard who has lived long enough to see his children and friends all die before him. These old places, grand with the art and architecture of a statelier and freer time than ours, touch strangely poets, artists, thinkers—asses, as the Lady Joan would have said.

Its antiquity could not “scare” her, nor its sanctity silence her.

She entered on its possession with the zeal of an encamping gipsy and the ruthlessness of an army of occupation.

She drew on a big pair of untanned boots, strode over the lands, marked the waste there was, and said to herself that she would soon alter all *that*. Before the summer was gone she had installed herself mistress there; before the winter had come she had taught its master that she meant to be mistress and master both. When next the springtime came round she did not consult his pleasure, or feel any necessity for hysterics; she took for granted that she should go to Fiordelisa.

She did go. This time Mr. Challoner accompanied her, and took with him some packets of English seeds and the model of a kitchen boiler.

The family installed itself at Fiordelisa audaciously as Tchiganes, sagaciously as Prussians. They cut walks, levelled trees, made the garden a fair imitation of the gravelled parallelograms of South Kensington, closed in the loggia with doors of coloured glass as nearly like a railway station as they could manage to make them; asked out English and Americans to dinner and breakfast, and began to interest themselves in breeding pigs and chickens.

“We’ve done so much for the old place!” said the Lady Joan, working a chair-cover, while her husband brought up Tegetmeier on Poultry.

“*L’audace, l’audace, toujours de l’audace*,” was her motto; and it is wonderful how very far one may manage to go by a diligent adherence to it in the world, as in war.

Five years and more had now passed by since that first mid-summer day when she had gone up as an occupant to Fiordelisa, and had turned out all the old pottery, and tapestries, and artistic lumber it was full of, with the zeal and zest of a victorious trooper ransacking a wine-cellar; and by this time the Lady Joan honestly considered herself the legitimate occupant of it, and would have looked on the establishment of any more lawful mistress there as an invasion of her rights as grave as an Irish peasant regards a writ of eviction to be.

She had stuck her staff in the ground at Fiordelisa, and never henceforth discoursed of it but as hers. When obliged to acknowledge the fact of its master’s presence and possession

she would allude to "poor Io" airily, as though he could not have afforded a dinner unless they had been there to give him one.

She set the china that she meant to sell on the shelves, spread the carpets he paid for on the floors, and then talked of how much she had done for him; invited people under his roof, and got credit for "such hospitality;" gave away his fruits, and eggs, and flowers, and wines, and was cited as "so generous;" and, further, amused herself throughout the spring with having out there to dine and to sleep every good-looking man who lingered in Rome and was glad to come and smoke under the stars in the old grey cortile.

Fiction is a greyhound and Truth is a snail. She set Fiction flying over the course. She had, indeed, once ordered out from England at her own expense two peach-trees and a Berkshire pig. It was all she ever had done; but, as everybody ate a peach and tasted the ham, and heard what she had done, everybody took all the rest for granted.

"I do so love my bees, and my beasts, and my pigs, and my poultry!" she herself would echo gushingly to the goody-goodies, to whom she was careful to appear as a kind of Harriet Martineau with a model farm of four (thousand) acres that was always, sleeping or waking, upon her mind.

"I am sure, most laudable," said the goody-goodies, quite impressed with the spectacle of a person born a Perth-Douglas absorbing herself in bees, and beasts, and pigs, and poultry. Higher society, less reverent and more *débonnaire*, laughed till it cried. But, whether leaving admiration or ridicule behind her, to Fiordelisa she went when the April narcissus was in bloom. She conceived a kind of passion for the place, it was so useful to her.

That dual character in her, which Voightel had chuckled over, had full luxury of expansion both ways at Fiordelisa; all the various and opposing passions of her nature found vent therein at Fiordelisa—she could be Cleopatra at sunset and a huckster at sunrise.

With a guitar on her knee and amorous eyes shining under the passion-flowers in the court by moonlight, one side of her temperament had its sport and play; with her skirts tucked about her knees, a memorandum-book in her hand, and a fierce vigilance in every one of her searching glances, striding through granaries, wine-cellar, and cattle-stalls; pursuing missing centimes through columns of figures, and making the bailiff wretched for a lost franc, the other side of her had its fullest and sweetest sway also.

To be sure, she never reflected that one view of her might spoil the other to the person by whose permission she was there;

she never reflected that the prosaic God of Business might take Love by the shoulders and turn him out of doors.

If Antony had seen Cleopatra squabbling for a coin over a basket of fish or a basket of dates, he might probably have recovered his senses and avoided Actium.

But she did not think of this.

She had become so used to Ioris, and so certain of her dominion over him, that she had altogether ceased to preserve for him those graces of appearance which the woman who is truly wise never neglects before the man whose passion she desires to keep alive.

Familiarity breeds contempt in the lover, as in the servant.

Lady Joan's vanity made her too forgetful of one supreme truth—that the longest absence is less perilous to love than the terrible trials of incessant proximity.

She forgot that love likes to preserve its illusions, and that it will bear better all the sharpest deprivations in the world than it will the cruel tests of an unlovely and unveiled intercourse.

She had committed the greatest error of all: she had let him be disenchanted by familiarity. Passion will pardon rage, will survive absence, will forgive infidelity, will even thrive on outrage, and will often condone a crime; but when it dies of familiarity it is dead for ever and aye.

The Lady Joan in her Oriental jewellery and her Asiatic dresses was a woman for Velasquez to paint, and most men to admire, and some to sigh for with ardour and desire. But the Lady Joan with thick untanned leather boots on, hair pulled tight from her face, and a grey skirt tucked up about her legs, or astride upon a donkey in a waterproof in muddy weather, counting the artichokes and tomatoes before they went to market—Lady Joan was not a woman to adore or to portray; and Ioris, artist as Nature had made him, and lover as he was expected to be, opening his window in the lovely rosy dawn and looking down on her thus occupied, would sigh and wonder whatever he had seen—why ever he had sacrificed himself;—and so, tired, and nerveless, and discontented, and afraid to show his discontent, he would go down his staircase and into the radiant balmy morning that itself outshone all the dreams of all the poets, and would hear her delighted voice ring out, "Seven robins and a nightingale shot before breakfast, Io! What do you think of that?" and dared not say what he thought of it, but had to smile and praise her skill, and look at the little pretty ruffled blood-stained heap of feathers; and submit to have the hand that was black with the cartridges passed through his arm to draw him into the loggia, where the morning meal was spread; and had to take his coffee and fruit seasoned with stories of how Nannia had been caught

sneaking off with a stolen cabbage, and how Pepe had been detected filling his pockets with green peas as he had weighed them ; and all the while to himself watched drearily the silver threads that the light found out in his mistress's hair, and wondered why she dressed so shabbily because she was in the country, and thought how large her hand looked as it plunged amongst the strawberries, and felt vaguely that this was not the companion fitting to that old sunlit, air-swept, flower-scented loggia, with the roses round its columns, and beyond its arches the wide blue hills.

But she did not dream of this ; she dug and planted, and bought and sold, and planned and bargained ; she kept a sharp eye on the weights and measures, she ran up model styes and breeding-pens ; she got up at five to count the potatoes and melons, the cherries and cabbages that went to the market ; she rode his horses, and ordered his bailiffs, and strode about in grey linen and big boots, and did on the whole most admirably—for herself.

No doubt if he had overheard her explaining to her English and Americans how all this was done only out of charity, to help, “poor Io,” it would all have speedily come to an end. But then he never did hear—except just what was meant for his ear.

He had an uncomfortable feeling that it was all disagreeable, and tedious, and noisy ; and he prized the affection of his peasants and farmers, and their irritation under the new reign oppressed and saddened him. In his remembrance there might have been a great deal of waste, but there was a great deal of feudal affection. In other years at his annual visits there had been only smiles, laughter, music, rejoicing ; now there were often rebellion, discontent, imprecations, and sullen silence.

Of course, however, she, like all other great improvers, was not to be daunted by such a trivial thing as poor folks' devotion and mere clinging to old landmarks. She brought her new brooms and swept away with them vigorously ; and if the brooms caught at such old trumpery tapestries as custom, tradition, and loyalty, and pulled them down in fragments, so much the better, she thought ; she cared for no old rubbish—that wouldn't sell again.

He sighed and let her sweep on.

Meanwhile Mr. Challoner was always careful to set the seal of his presence, with his flower seeds and his kitchen boilers, on the private life of Fiordelisia, and at the beginning of each summer was always to be duly met with by any passing visitors gravely contemplating his wife's poultry-pens or solemnly watering his own stove-plants, and in his pursuit of those innocent occupations would always find some occasion to say, in

an abstracted manner, leaning over a model pig-stye, "Yes, yes, we have done a good deal for the place; my wife is never so happy as when she is doing good; yes, we brought over those Berkshires. Nothing like English breed, nothing."

Society thought Mr. Challoner very amiable and strangely blind.

Mr. Challoner suffered neither from amiability nor blindness. He quarrelled incessantly with his wife about everything else, little and large; but he never quarrelled about Ioris.

What could a blade of steel in a wintry dawn have given Mr. Challoner of vengeance comparable to that which he smiled grimly over as he saw another man, daily and hourly, bullied, ridiculed, stormed at, ordered about, driven to account for every absent hour, and deprived of every vestige of a will of his own?

Mr. Challoner was like the Dauphin who kept the luxury of a whipping-boy.

Vengeance!—

*"N'allons pas chercher à faire une querelle
Pour un affront qui n'est que pure bagatelle!"*

There was no one living on earth to whom Mr. Challoner owed so much comfort as he did to Ioris. And, indeed, he would say, with quite a cordial ring in his voice, "Ioris? Oh, a very good fellow—the best friend we have!"

A quiet, excellent woman, who was his father's widow and no relation to him, but whom he called his "mother," because it is always so respectable to have a mother, would occasionally, on visiting at the Casa Challoner, observe with disquietude the Lady Joan disporting herself in a break full of masks on Giovedì Grasso, or going out shooting, with her gun, and her hessians, and her Roman nobles; and on such occasions old Mrs. Challoner would murmur to the master of the establishment, "Puir laddie! it's a great name and a braw house to have married into, and that there's no denying; but I'm thinking, my poor Robert, that you have paid a muckle price for the gentility."

"Joan has high spirits; it is merely high spirits," Mr. Challoner would return, with an austerity that closed the discussion.

For Mr. Challoner never told anybody what price he had paid, whether muckle or mickle. He had never given any living soul the right to say that he was other than a most contented husband.

He had made his bargain with his eyes open, and the bargain had been that he was to keep his eyes shut. And he fulfilled it loyally.

Now and then he winced—now and then he smiled. But it

was only to himself. Lady Joan, who quarrelled with him to his face, and railed at him behind his back, could not resist a sort of admiration for his impassibility. "The creature might be cut out of wood!" she said often. Now, a wooden husband is the most convenient of all lay figures.

This winter afternoon the real master of Fiordelisa, with his guest, strolled upward by the hill-paths bordered with aloe and cactus, and shaded with cereus and cistus, towards the yet higher lands of Fiordelisa, where the stone-pines reigned alone with the tall lilac heather at their feet.

He strove to understand, to interest, and to amuse Etoile, and he succeeded. He had at command graceful thoughts and picturesque diction; he loved art, and had studied it profoundly. He had been irritated because this stranger, herself eminent in the world's sight, seemed to think him a slave without power or purpose, and the unlikeness of her to any other woman that he had ever known stung him to interest and moved him to exertion.

Ioris, like many men before him, had sunk into an existence in which his mind had no share.

It was as nearly brainless as a naturally intelligent man's life can ever be.

To obey all his ruler's desires; to attend to the thousand and one trivialities that she daily imposed; to see that what she ordered was done, and what she wanted found; to follow her hither and thither; to avert the tempest of her temper by prevision of her wishes, and to be careful that his servants, his horses, his house, his patience, his presence, his endurance, his exertions were all ready to the moment that she might call on them—all this made his day one incessant and joyless routine of obedience. He woke in the morning with the dreary round before him, and he lay down at night seeing nothing better for the morrow, or for fifty hundred other morrows, if he lived long enough to have them dawn on him. Such a life killed his intelligence. The pure impersonal efforts of the mind may be heightened by a great joy and may be deepened by a great sorrow; but a life of perpetual triviality, yet of perpetual conflict—a life, in a word, which has been condensed into the one common comprehensive word of *worry*—does so irritate and yet benumb the faculties that all intellectual effort dies out under it. It had been so with him.

Lady Joan was no fool; but she was one of those women who lower all they touch more than many fools.

No delicate thought could live under one of her loud laughs; no impersonal discussion could survive her boisterous personalities. Art itself looked ridiculous beside her pretentious patronage of it and mercenary traffic in it. And the obliquity

of her mental vision seemed to communicate itself to those about her till in her presence a praying angel of Mino da Fiesole's soillless marble looked no better than a squat bonze from a Chinese temple. As there are women who exalt all that comes in contact with them, so did she lower all things.

It was not her fault. Nature had made her so.

But the effect on the mind of Ioris had been that of smoke on painting: it had dulled all the colour and obscured all the lines.

A certain lassitude crossed by a certain irritation had grown on him; and the scholarship of his early youth, and the proficiency of art which had distinguished him at one time, had died down into silence and obscurity.

They were not needed for the wrangles of the house he frequented, and the scenes of barter that he was called upon to assist at in antiquity shops.

With Etoile they awoke. For the man who is a scholar by culture will never altogether lose delight in it, and the temper that is born with the poetic element in it will never absolutely fail to answer to the right touch. It becomes like a harp whose silver strings are covered with dust, entangled, jarred, and mute; but are still silver, and still keep song in them when they are struck aright.

Not such a song, indeed, as when the chords first were strung, for time and wrong usage have done much to mar them; but still a song—a song sadder than tears sometimes.

The hill-paths were steep and the way long, but it seemed to have been short to them both, when at last they reached the pine-wood, where Rocca di Papa was visible. High above hung the little grey tower on the rock where Juno once stood to watch how the battle went; at least, we believe so, if we hearken to Virgil; and if we will not believe Virgil what right have we in Rome at all?

The sun was bright on the Volscian hills, and the snow on the line of the Leonessa and on the heights of the Sabine mountains glowed like an opal in the light. The low lands looked dusky and bronzo-hued from clouds that hung above them, and a purple cloud shrouded the wild dark mountain of Soracte and floated midway between earth and heaven—far, far away was a glancing line that showed where the sea was beating on the sad sands by Ostia; and aloft, white and stern as an Alp, rose Monte Gennaro, who wraps his mantle of frost around him till the maize is tall in the plains, and the girls are singing amongst the poppies. And in the centre of it all was Rome, with the cross of St. Peter's clear against the light, and all the vast cloud-world around it.

There is no view on the earth like this from one of the heights of the mountains of Rome.

Etoile looked and was silent. The great tears gathered in her eyes, but did not fall.

He watched her.

"You feel things too much," he said softly.

She had forgotten him; and she looked up with the surprise of a sleeper awakened from a dream.

"Oh no, I think not," she answered him. "I pity those to whom the world is not so beautiful as it is to me."

"And yet there are tears in your eyes."

"Are there? I cannot tell you—you, who have always lived here, cannot know, I think—all that one feels in looking so on Rome. One seems to see as God sees—all the hosts of the dead arise."

He was silent. The words moved him. He bowed his head and stood in silence, like one who will not break in upon a woman at prayer.

At that moment his name echoed shrilly on the clear air. He started and listened.

"Forgive me," he said quickly. "She is calling us. In a little while it will be dark."

"Where on earth have you been?" said the Lady Joan, with her face black as a lowering thundercloud as it loomed upon them through the lines of the tall polished laurel trees. "Where on earth have you been, Io? The idea of climbing up here! and without me! I asked for you everywhere. The coffee is cold, and we shall have it pitch-dark to drive home; and there is that young idiot's opera to-night. What could you be doing up here all this time?"

"We have consoled Imperator; and we have trodden in the steps of Juno," Etoile made answer for him; and she looked Lady Joan straight in the eyes as she spoke.

There was something in the look of contempt and of challenge: she herself was unconscious of it, but the other was alive to it.

"If she dare to cross me here!" thought Lady Joan; and her brow darkened in storm and her eyes glittered till they were green as an angry cat's. She was sullen and silent as they descended to the house and drank the coffee which was awaiting them in the square stone court.

Fiordelisa was the apple of her eye.

It was not, perhaps, very dignified work—squabbling with peasantry, counting potatoes and beans, ousting old folks from little territorial rights, keeping a sharp eye on the olive-presses and the wine-tubs, and hunting up the Cochin China eggs out of the straw and thatch.

But what would you?

John Vatices, Emperor here in Rome, gave his wife a costly crown of emeralds and diamonds that was bought with the proceeds of his poultry, and why should not the hens of Fiordelisa lay rings of sapphire and earrings of turquoises?

Lady Joan pulled on her thick driving-gloves with a jerk before the coffee was fairly drunk. Ioris and Etoile were talking gaily and laughing together.

"I am sorry to hurry you," she said coldly. "But the moment the sun goes down the nights are so bitter. And Io has a fancy, you know, for us to hear the new opera. A boy, who lived in a dirty little poking town of the Maremma, has dreamt that he is Mozart and Rossini combined, and Io devoutly believes in him. Io's geese are all swans."

"A more amiable optimism, at any rate, than the common one, which swears there are no swans at all—only a few ducks in a pond," said Etoile, taking her coffee from him.

She smiled at him as she spoke. Almost insensibly she felt drawn into defending him against these persistent mockeries, which had so little wit or wisdom in them.

"Perhaps we *are* only ducks," she added. "But we are always grateful to anybody who will believe in our snowy plumage, and who will vow for us that our stagnant little pond of vanity is a lake in which the mountains of the world are mirrored. Who is this young composer come out of the Maremma?"

"A boy of great genius," said Ioris; "very young—only twenty-two. He has had no education, except a year in Bologna; but he has, with many faults, many excellences. This is his first opera. It is on the theme of Persephone. Parts of it are very fine; and I think the choral renderings——"

"It is hideous rubbish," said Lady Joan, roughly. "Just singsong out of Verdi and Gounod, and the 'infernal' part of it all borrowed wholesale out of 'Lohengrin'—growl, growl, growl—bang, bang, bang—that's all. Besides, it's been done in *Orphée aux Enfers*."

"That is not quite the same thing," said Ioris, with an involuntary smile.

"The same story," said Lady Joan confidently, turning to Etoile. "The opera's stuff. But the boy happened to get hold of Io last year; and Io thinks he knows counterpoint and all that; and so he's flattered, and believes in the trash, and uses all his influence to get the opera put on the stage of the Apollo. I dare say, if the truth were known, the dresses and things have come out of his own pocket. If he'd only a crust he'd give it to the first creature that squealed out for it. Oh, you know you would, Io, if I didn't keep you straight. Give me a cigar. No,

there's no time for more coffee. See they put those grapes in; I want them for the Bishop of Melita. And they're to kill that sheep for me to-morrow. Mind Tista don't forget. And they'd better shoot a few hares and send me them with the mutton in the morning; there's that big dinner we have to-morrow, and Marjory wants one to jug for her father. And mind you tell the man to get that fence done by Monday; and if the blacksmith don't come and put the padlocks on those gates directly I won't pay him one farthing—not one farthing!"

"If I didn't see to the things *he* never would," she explained as she took the reins of the ponies. "He'd let people dawdle on for ever, and pay 'em just the same for doing nothing. They know I won't stand that nonsense. I've had all the gates put up and padlocked: the whole land used to lie open."

"The people here must be very fond of you," said Etoile.

Lady Joan did not feel the satire.

"Oh, I don't know. They ought to be. I physic 'em when they're ill. Such wry faces they pull! Of course I'm very kind to 'em all; but first of all one must make a thing pay—in Io's interests, you know."

"And you are of opinion with Zoroaster that to reap the earth with profit is of more merit than to repeat—or win—ten thousand prayers?"

"I am rather of Plutarch's," said Ioris, joining them, and stroking his ponies.

"Was Plutarch an ass, then?" asked the Lady Joan with supreme scorn.

"*You* would have thought him so; he could never bring himself to sell in its old age the ox which in its youth had served him faithfully. *Voilà tout*."

"That is just the sort of sentimental stuff to please you. The ox would make very good beef," retorted the Lady Joan. "Mind! my sables are over the wheel."

She cut the ponies sharply over their heads with the whip and started them off full gallop down the rugged slope, leaving their master to spring up behind as best he might. The ponies were his own: spirited little cobs from Friuli, with jingling silver bells, and swinging foxes' tails hung at their ears; but no sort of possession was he allowed to enjoy of them.

"I want Grillo and Pippo to-day," he would say of a morning; and his groom would answer, "I am very sorry, Excellence, but the Signora has ordered them." Ioris had to shrug his shoulders and see his ponies depart to the Casa Challoner. Why did he never rebel? He began to ask it of himself, leaning with his arms on the front seat of the carriage, looking at the profile of Etoile before him in the twilight.

"I do so wish you would come to the theatre to-night. Do

change your mind. There are only the Plinlimmons at dinner—bores, I know; but we should cut it short with the Opera," urged Lady Joan as she stopped the ponies to set her guest down in the Quirinal Square, and pressed an invitation which she knew was quite safe, since she had chanced to hear that Etoile would pass that evening with the Princess Vera, who had "two or three people"—*i.e.*, about two or three hundred.

"The idea of her going to Princess Vera's!" she muttered as she drove away. "Preposterous!"

"Why that?" said Ioris, lighting a cigar, as the ponies dashed down the street of Four Fountains.

"Good gracious, Io! can you want to ask? But Princess Vera will know any artistic trash that takes her fancy—rude as she can be to every respectable person."

And she slashed Pippo across the ears again. She herself was among the respectable persons whom the Princess Vera treated with a calm ignorance of their existence very exasperating.

The ponies rattled up the steep stones to her house; and her husband, who was just then going in at the door, stopped, aided Ioris to unload her furs, and hoped they had had a pleasant day at Fiordelisa.

"Are you disposed to let Lady Norwich have your turquoises?" asked Mr. Challoner, ten minutes later, following his wife into the privacy of her own room.

"Yes, she may have 'em. I only bought them to sell again."

"I thought of saying two thousand fiances?"

"Yes—that won't be bad. I gave eight hundred; but then the woman was hard up at Homburg, you remember, and glad to let 'em go cheap. I grudge 'em to that old cat. Mind, she thinks we brought 'em from Persia, and had 'em polished in Vienna."

"You'll never do better with them: I think it is a very good price."

"Tolerable. And they don't suit me. Blue's for blondes. Besides, they're nasty uncertain things: one never knows they won't change colour. What about the Urbino jar?"

"I got it. It is genuine. An incomparable bit. You always make horrible mistakes, but you did not blunder there. The fellow had no idea of the value of it. I bought it like a common bit of kitchen pottery."

"Yes, I know—the man kept his sugar in it."

"By the way, old O'Glennamaddy wants an antique altar-screen."

"Very well. We haven't one; but Mimo shall draw one, and little Faello can carve it. It can be ready in twenty days. O'Glen is a goose—he'd take anything."

"Yes. But people are not all geese that will go to visit him. Remember that. You had best show him good things."

"Don't you preach. I know O'Glen as I do my alphabet. He used to give me burnt-almonds when I was a baby. I say—mind you go yourself about that little Pietà to that man in Trastevere. Io was going, but I wouldn't let him; he never beats the people down; and he talks some rubbish about the man's wife being ill with the ague—as if that had anything to do with it! That's just like Io. He bought a little plate of Gubbio ware yesterday; the woman that owned it asked him fifteen francs, and he went and gave her seventy—seventy!—just because the thing was worth it—so he said; but I believe it was only because she was crying about her landlord pressing for rent. That's just like Io—cry a little, and his hand goes in his pocket in a second."

Mr. Challoner smiled grimly.

His wife was very fond of airing her contempt for her friend's weaknesses before him. Not that there was the slightest occasion to do so. Mr. Challoner had left all remnants of jealousy long buried in the delta of Orontes and Euphrates, of Abana and Pharphar. And besides, there was such perfect confidence between his wife and himself that there was never any need for explanations.

"I have boundless trust in her," he would say austere with injured dignity if some old friend, too officious, ventured to hint that Lady Joan was a little—a little—perhaps a little too original. And, like all people who have boundless trust, he would shut his eyes when bidden.

This kind of business-conference was a closer tie between them than any the marriage-altar could forge, and at discussions of this sort they were always good friends, finding each other's views and principles often identical. Indeed, so sound were his wife's ideas about business, that Mr. Challoner could use his pet phrase with perfect veracity when speaking of her.

"You'll come to the Opera to-night?" asked the Lady Joan now.

"No—no."

"Oh, you'd better. The Norwiches will be there, and that old cat Plinlimmon is coming with us. They'll all talk if you don't."

"Very well," said Mr. Challoner: he was always resigned to self-sacrifice for the public good. "You told them at Fiordelisa that I should bring Lord Norwich up to shoot on Monday?"

"Yes. Mind, though; Norwich thinks we've bought the place. You'd better make a party and take up a cold luncheon. Echéance will go, and Plunkett, and Gualdro Malestrina, and perhaps some of the attachés would if you asked 'em, though I hate all that *Chancellerie* lot—stiff as pokers! By-the-by, since we put up the trespass-boards all round, the game's in much better order. Io protests, and says the people will knife him for

it some day, because they've always netted the hares and birds as they wanted them; but that's all rubbish, I think. Anyhow, they shan't get a head of game if I can help it. There's such heaps of partridges! I shall have 'em trapped for market when we've had the pick of the shooting. I wish you'd write to England about those pigs; and tell 'em to send out some pink kidney potatoes for planting—the Early Emilys are the best. I settled that bill for the last, and never struck the wharf-duties off it, though I told him the shipper ought to pay them; but he's always so careless about money. That's the door-bell, isn't it?—that horrid Plinlimmon woman—she's got up like a parrot, green and red and yellow and blue, I dare say. What a nuisance it is to have to do the polite! Go in and say all sorts of things to her while I dress."

Mr. Challoner went in, obedient, and welcomed the Plinlimmons, who were very rich people, who had made a vast fortune by a new kind of candle, warranted never to melt or to splutter, and fulfilling its warranty nobly. He apologised for his wife's tardy appearance; and quite affected the Plinlimmons, who were simple, sentimental folks, oppressed with the extent of their own wealth and their own ignorance, by the tender manner in which he regretted his wife's imprudence in being out so late in the cold, thereby endangering her lungs and his happiness—but she was so wilful, and so fond of art, and so charitable—and she had been visiting a poor painter, who had been laid up with fever, etc., etc., etc.

From painters to painting is a natural transition, and led naturally to the sight of some landscapes which were on sale for a charity, and which the Plinlimmons fell in love with, and begged might be sent to them at the Hôtel Constantia; and so the time was whiled away until the Lady Joan entered, radiant in amber, and black lace, and Etruscan ornaments, and greeted her dearest Mrs. Plinlimmon with that cordial and honest warmth which was her greatest attraction to shy women and timid men.

Then there entered silently without announcement one whom Mr. Challoner presented to the good Monmouthshire folks aloud as "our valued friend—the Prince Ioris," and, with a *sotto voce* whisper, "A Spanish duke as well as a Roman prince—a godson of the Pope's."

And the valued friend bowed with a calm, ceremonious grace not common in Monmouthshire, and said some courteous phrases in French, and then fell back and gazed at Mrs. Plinlimmon in her gorgeous attire with grave amazement, and murmured to himself, "*Dio mio! Dio mio!*"

"You must be very civil to 'em; they're awfully rich—made pots of money by candles," whispered Lady Joan in his ear as she bade him fasten her bracelet.

He had learned what people who were rich meant in the Casa Challoner, and was silent.

He was ordered to give his arm to the Plinlimmon daughter, who had red hair, and was dressed in green; and he failed to comprehend a word of her French, and wished those stupid, ill-dressed islanders would not come to bore him; and felt more tired all through the dinner than he had ever done in all his life.

"How absent you are, Io!" said Lady Joan sharply as the Fiordelisa woodcocks went round.

"Ioris is thinking of Mademoiselle Etoile," said Mr. Challoner, with a grim smile. "You have often heard of Mademoiselle Etoile, no doubt, Mrs. Plinlimmon?"

And they discussed Mademoiselle Etoile with asperity, as became people at whose table she had dined six nights before.

Ioris sat silent, with a flush on his face.

Lady Joan looked at him from time to time with suspicion—it was not possible that he was really thinking about anything but herself?

"What is the matter with you to-night?" she muttered roughly as she rose to go to the Opera.

Ioris shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, *ma chère!* when you weigh me to the earth with a red-haired demoiselle, with teeth like a wild boar's and the bones of a giantess!"

Lady Joan laughed and told him to hold his tongue; they were as rich as Cræsus. Then, quite satisfied, she let him fold her cashmeres about her and take her to the carriage.

A very vain woman is always so easily lulled into contentment.

She ridiculed every note of the "Persephone" all the way through it, because it amused her to do so, and because she had begrudged the money he had spent in helping the boy-composer of it. But Ioris, sitting in the shadow, scarcely heard her. He was thinking of the sunset on the hill under Rocca di Papa.

He was glad when the tedious evening drew to its close and left him free.

Meantime the Plinlimmons went to their hotel, enchanted with having met a live Italian Prince, and such attention from so charming a household, and when they should depart to be in time for the assembling of Parliament (Plinlimmon being member for a borough), would tell everybody that the Casa Challoner was the most delightful house in Rome. To shy people the Lady Joan's ardent cordiality was unspeakably precious, and to ignorant people her extensive artistic allusions were unspeakably imposing; besides, she was really a Pertli-Douglas. To nervous persons who have made candles such a

union of rank and good-nature as she presented was altogether irresistible.

"Yes, yes; they were chosen for us by a friend of ours, Lady Joan Challoner; she'd just got the like for her own cousin, the Countess of Hebrides," Mrs. Plinlimmon would say before many objects of Italian art in her London reception rooms; and would feel happy and glorious in the possession alike of high art and high acquaintances. Such general felicity could a clever woman diffuse only by smiling and selling a few trifles.

The Lady Joan was catholic in her sympathies in society, and obeyed the mandate of Edward the Third to his ladylove—

"Bid her be free and general as the sun,
Who smiles upon the basest weed that grows
As lovingly as on the fragrant rose."

For the Lady Joan never forgot that there are weeds by which an attentive gatherer has before this discovered a vein of gold in common soil, or found a fortune in a pool of borax.

Lady Joan knew that after all it is *l'infiniment petit* that is infinitely great.

A woman like Etoile will be blind to this. She will be touched instantly by pain; she will be moved to quick charity; she will be capable of strong deed and deep thought; she will answer trust or appeal as a golden harp the player's touch; but the small things of life will pass by her—what is antipathetic to her she will offend by unconscious neglect, what is distasteful to her she will turn hostile by careless disdain; she will go through the world doing good where she can, cleaving to what seems to her to be truth, and seeking unwittingly only what responds to her own temperament; so the world is set thick with foes for her, as the path of the jungle with snakes.

Lady Joan was a proud woman in her own odd fashion, and it hurt her pride bitterly sometimes to do so much homage to the Infinitesimal Petit; but she did do it, and she secured the suffrages of all the little people who wanted to look great, of all the frogs who wanted to be bulls, of all the geese who wanted to be swans, of all the free and enlightened republicans who flew to a title as a moth to a light, of all the small gentilities who were nobodies in their own counties at home, but abroad gave themselves airs, and had quite a number of figures to their bank balance—in francs.

It hurt her pride sorely, yet she did it; and, like everybody who is wise in his own generation, she reaped her reward in kind.

When the Norwiches dined there on the next night, Lady Joan was different in character. The Norwich people were great, solemn, stupid, and of vast influence. He was a marquis

of long descent, she the daughter and sister of a duke; they were very fussy, very pompous, very proud. Lady Joan dressed herself in rigid black velvet, and only wore a string of pearls; she was very quiet, looked classic and handsome; talked of her child, showed only really good things, set Ioris at the far end of the table, and spoke, if at all, distantly of Fiordelisa as "a place we go to in the summer. Mr. Challoner likes farming."

For the Norwiches, and such persons as the Norwiches generally, Lady Joan was as much of a gentlewoman as she could be—nervous a little, a little abrupt, too anxious for approval, and too careful to conciliate, but otherwise quite irreproachable.

The Norwiches and such people as the Norwiches, going home, would say: "That daughter of Archie's lives at Rome. Oh yes, we dined with them; oh yes, grown a very agreeable woman, too—quite quiet; a good mother, and seems to agree with that person she married very well. Oh, of course we dined there. One must always stand up for a Perth-Douglas."

Now and then, indeed—for no human mind is so godlike that it can altogether foresee and prevent every accident—the Norwich people, or the people of whom Lord and Lady Norwich were types, were startled by coming suddenly across Lady Joan, without her bib-and-tucker, *tête-à-tête* with Ioris at some marble table in a Paris café, or some green bench at an open-air concert at Spa, when business had obliged her to travel, and she had mingled business with pleasure: the real Lady Joan without meeting-house clothes on; the real Lady Joan who was Cleopatra by moonlight up at Fiordelisa; the real Lady Joan who came home from masquerades at five in the morning; the real Lady Joan who sang and smoked, with a dozen men about her, half the night; and this real Lady Joan would startle the Norwiches and other decorous personages a little unpleasantly and give them a sudden sensation as of sea-sickness. But she would whip on her bib-and-tucker very lightly and quickly, and would explain: "I'm on my way to join Mr. Challoner, and he don't like me to travel alone; so he sent Ioris to meet me. I only loses my money and gets the wrong labels stuck on my boxes; and of course I could travel by myself from here to San Francisco, but Mr. Challoner is always so fidgety."

So she would adjust bib-and-tucker before the café mirror; and the Norwiches, or the type of persons they represented, would be satisfied, and say to each other, "You see her husband knows it; there can't be anything in it," and so would go and see her in the winter, though they had had that awkward view of her eating her *sorbet* with the handsome Italian beside her, smoking his cigarette—a situation which would have ruined any woman of less resources and her ready invention. But in truth

the Lady Joan was Protean, and slipped in and out of a dozen various skins as easily as a lizard slips out of its tail.

"Why do the great ladies go to see our Prince's *dama*?" said many a good Roman matron of them all standing at one of the fountains in the wall to gossip with her neighbours as the carriages swept by to the Casa Challoner.

They did not understand it.

They were not aware of the golden rules of good society.

Paolotto, the baker, had a handsome wife, who betrayed him for Franco, the Swiss Guard, with the fair curls, on duty at the Pope's Palace yonder, and Paolotto's wife set out at nightfall once too often; and Paolotto following, fell upon fair Franco with a knife, and slew the Swiss ere he had time to point his halberd. That they could understand. That was Roman and righteous—just as much so as if it had been the other way, and it had been the Swiss who, by God's grace, had killed the baker. Anything, so that it was man to man, and good steel used about it.

But then they are barbarians still in old Trastevere.

If Paolotto had been trained in good society he would have only smiled on Franco of the yellow curls, and asked him to speak fair some upper scullion, so as to get the Paolotto loaves ordered and taken for the Vatican kitchen, and so have warmed his oven if his heart were cold, and made his loaves of lighter weight, having the Papal patronage and blessing. Poor Paolotto drew his knife instead; and as he went through the streets between the Guards to pay his penalty, Lady Cardiff, who was passing by, looked at him and asked what he had done; and hearing, smiled and said, "Vengeance is out of date, like flour, my poor fellow. We have ground bones, and Friendship."

CHAPTER XII.

"It's lasted some years, but I don't think they can be very well suited," said Lady Cardiff, watching through her eye-glass the forms of Ioris and Mr. Challoner's wife pass away down the vista of her own numerous rooms, after a visit of ceremony on her day. "I don't think they can be very well suited; he looks like Romance, and she like the Money Market. The Eros he would choose would be a soft, tender god of silence and shadow; and hers is a noisy little Advertising Agent, with handbills and a paste-pot. Very bad form, by the way, to *afficher* publicly like that."

Etoile, who had become somewhat intimate with this merciless speaker, and who had just then entered, reddened a little.

"You dine often with her, Lady Cardiff!"

"What a tragical tone of reproach! No, my dear Comtesse, I don't dine there often. Far from it. I find it too expensive to have to buy a pan or a platter, or some ugly *mayot* or other every time after dinner—it would come cheaper at Spillman's. She amuses me, though. Clever woman—knows how to suit herself to her society, and *never* knows when she has a rebuff. How useful that is!"

"Surely she never suffers one?" said Etoile. "Every one appears to like her." A sentiment of loyalty to her absent old friend, and to the woman whose hand she took in friendship, moved her to a defence with which her convictions did not go.

Lady Cardiff smiled and dropped her eye-glass.

"Oh, of course people like her. She'll bore herself to death. There's no more popular quality. Besides, she has such a tower of strength in that excellent husband of hers. Of all lay figures, there is none on earth so useful as a wooden husband. You should get a wooden husband, my dear, if you want to be left in peace. It is like a comfortable slipper or your dressing-gown after a ball. It is like springs to your carriage. It is like a clever maid who never makes mistakes with your notes or comes without coughing discreetly through your dressing-room. It is like tea, cigarettes, postage-stamps, foot-warmers, eiderdown counterpanes—anything that smooths life, in fact. Young women do not think enough of this. An easy-going husband is the one indispensable comfort of life. He is like a set of sables to you. You may never want to put them on; still, if the north wind do blow—and one can never tell—how handy they are!

You pop into them in a second, and no cold wind can find you out, my dear. Couldn't find you out, if your shift were in rags underneath! Without your husband's countenance, you have scenes. With scenes, you have scandal. With scandal, you come to a suit. With a suit, you most likely lose your settlements. And without your settlements, where are you in society? With a husband like that wooden creature Mr. Challoner, you are safe. You need never think about him in any way. His mere existence suffices. He will always be at the bottom of your table and the head of your visiting-cards. That is enough. He will represent Respectability for you, without your being at the trouble to represent Respectability for yourself. Respectability is a thing of which the shadow is more agreeable than the substance. Happily for us, society only requires the shadow."

With which Lady Cardiff, wittiest of women by heritage, as her grandmother had frightened Fox and almost awed Sydney Smith, crossed the room and lighted a fresh cigarette.

"And love," said Etoile, "where does that come in your arrangements?"

"Olives and sweetmeats, my love," said Lady Cardiff. "I am talking of soup and fish and the *rôti*—and of the man who pays for them. Young women don't think enough of the *rôti*. They fall in love with some handsome ass who makes court to them after the style of French *feuilletons*, and they believe life will be always moonlight and kisses. Once married, he spends all their money, damns them a dozen times a day, and keeps his smile for other houses, while ten to one he is as jealous as a Turk to boot. Moonlight and kisses are excellent in their way, but they should come *afterwards*. They are only olives and sweetmeats. You can't dine on them. Those pretty trifles are for Paolo and Francesca, not for Mr. and Mrs. Rimini. I am very immoral? My dear Comtesse, I am only practical. An easy husband, who never asks questions or cares where your letters go—ah! you must have been married to a Lord Cardiff, as I have been, to know the blessing of *that*. With an easy husband you have all the amusement of doing wrong and all the credit of doing right."

"In this case, indeed," she went on, "it is that poor Ioris who pays for the *rôti* as well as the *bonbons*, which is hardly fair. But that does not matter a bit to Society—Society will always go to dinner so long as the husband sits at the end of the table. Disgraceful? Oh, well, perhaps; but if the husband like it we have no business to say so. Of course Belisarius knew Antonina once danced in nothing but a zone, and had always had a weakness for big biceps; but if Belisarius liked to make-believe that Antonina was a piece of ice incarnated, Byzantium was bound to make-believe so too, and to know nothing about the zone and

the biceps. You do not see it? Of course not, because you are a great artist and do not trouble your head to understand Society. You live on Olympus. We are mere mortals."

"That is severe, Lady Cardiff."

"No, my dear. It must be a great thing to have Cloudland to resort to if Society turn one out of doors; but to poor ordinary humanity, that has no heaven beyond the card-basket, Society has a weight that you people who are poets never can be brought to comprehend. I believe that you really are all happier if your card-basket is quite empty, because nobody ever disturbs your dreams by ringing at your door-bell."

The Marchioness of Cardiff loved to call herself an old woman. But she had kept three things of youth in her—a fair skin, a frank laugh, and a fresh heart. She was a woman of the world to the tips of her fingers; she had had a life of storm and a life of pleasure; she turned night into day; she thought no romance worth reading save Balzac's and Fielding's; she did not mind how wicked you were if only you never were dull. She was majestic and still handsome, and looked like an empress when she put on her diamonds and sailed down a *salon*. On the other hand, she would laugh till she cried; she would do an enormity of good and always conceal it; she honoured unworldliness, when she saw it, though she regarded it as a kind of magnificent dementia; and, with all her sharpness of sight, the veriest impostor that ever whined of his misery could woo tears to her eyes and money from her purse. She always wintered in Rome, and never lived with Lord Cardiff. He and she were both people who were delightful to everybody else, but not to each other. She was a Tory of the old school and a Legitimist of the first water; she believed in Divine right, and never could see why the Reform Bill had been necessary. Nevertheless, Voltaire was her prophet, and Rochefoucauld her breviary; and though she saw no salvation outside the *Almanach de Gotha*, her quick wit almost drove her at times near the wind of Democracy. Anomalies are always amusing, and Lady Cardiff was one of the most amusing women in Europe.

"Smoke. Why don't you smoke?" she said to Etoile. "You make me think of Talleyrand and whist. What a miserable old age you prepare for yourself! You look grave, *ma chère Comtesse*. What are you thinking about?"

"Pardon me. I was thinking of my friend Dorotea. She is blameless, and the world is cruel to her. Yet in these women you talk of the same world makes a jest of dishonour. Why? It is unjust and capricious."

"When was the world ever anything *but* unjust and capricious?" said Lady Cardiff. "Still, do you mean to tell me, really honestly, *sans phrases*, that the Duchesse Santorin is faithful to that brute and spendthrift?"

"Entirely faithful; entirely blameless—yes."

"Dear me!"

Lady Cardiff was so amazed that she walked the whole length of her room and back again. It was late in the day, and her visitors and courtiers had all departed; she and Etoile were alone.

"It is no *use*, you know," she said at last; "nobody'll ever believe it."

"Dorotea's actions are not shaped by what people believe."

"Dear me!" said Lady Cardiff once more.

"When one gets amongst these kind of people one is all adrift," she thought to herself. "They have such extraordinary ideas."

"But there was great scandal about Fédor Souroff. You can't deny that," she said aloud.

"Count Souroff has a great and loyal love for her—yes. But he obeys her. He is in the Caucasus, trying to lose his life, and failing, of course, as all do who wish to lose it."

"How very uncomfortable!" said Lady Cardiff. "Then everybody was wrong, and she don't care for him?"

"That is a question I can have no right to reply to, I think."

"You mean she *does*? Then she'll call him back from the Caucasus, my dear; and goodness knows why she sent him there. You believe her, and I believe you, but nobody else would. *Nobody!*"

"Why not?"

"Oh, nobody, nobody! You know everybody says the worst they can now. They won't let her sing at Court in England this season."

"And yet——"

"And yet our dear Lady Joan can go to Court. Oh yes; and Mrs. Henry V. Clams too, and ten hundred others like them. You don't seem to understand. Your friend may have Count Souroff killed and buried in the Caucasus. It won't make any difference. Society has made up its mind."

"And why? What has she done, except be innocent?"

"Oh, dear, dear! what *has* that to do with it?" said Lady Cardiff, vexed as by the obtuseness of a little child to understand the alphabet, and thinking to herself, "One can't tell her it's because the woman is an artist—she's an artist herself."

"It seems to me the main question," said Etoile as she rose and gathered up her furs.

"That is because you live in Cloudland, as I tell you," said Lady Cardiff. "Who cares what Joan Challoner is or is not? She has got a well-trained husband, and we have to receive her, though we grin behind her back. Who cares what your beautiful friend is or is not? She has got a bad name, and she will be hanged

for it, like the poor proverbial dog that had one. You seem to me, my dear Comtesse Etoile, to take life far too terribly seriously. To your poetic temper it is a vast romance, beautiful and terrible, like a tragedy of Æschylus. You stand amidst it entranced, like a child by the beauty and awe of a tempest. And all the while the worldly-wise, to whom the tempest is only a matter of the machineries of a theatre—of painted clouds, electric lights, and sheets of copper—the worldly-wise govern the storm as they choose and leave you in it defenceless and lonely as old Lear. To put your heart into life is the most fatal of errors; it is to give a hostage to your enemies whom you can only ransom at the price of your ruin. But what is the use of talking? To you, life will be always Alastor and Epipsychidion, and to us, it will always be a Treatise on Whist. That's all!"

"A Treatise on Whist! No! It is something much worse. It is a Book of the Bastile, with all entered as criminal in it, who cannot be bought off by bribe or intrigue, by a rogue's stratagem or a courtesan's vice!"

Lady Cardiff laughed and wrapped the furs about her guest with a kindly touch.

"The world is only a big Harpagon, and you and such as you are Maître Jacques. '*Puisque vous l'avez voulu!*' you say,—and call him frankly to his face, '*Avare, ladre, vilain, fesse-mathieu!*' and Harpagon answers you with a big stick and cries, '*Apprenez à parler!*' Poor Maître Jacques! I never read of him without thinking what a type he is of Genius. No offence to you, my dear. He'd the wit to see he would never be pardoned for telling the truth, and yet he told it! The perfect type of genius."

Etoile went home thoughtful, and with a vague sense of trouble upon her.

She had taken as a residence part of an old palace, entered from the Montecavallo, but with all its great windows looking into the Rospigliosi gardens. The rooms were immense, vaulted, noble in form and proportion, with frescoes that were beautiful with the gorgeous fancies of some nameless artist of the days of the Carracci. Here she installed herself for the winter at her ease, and here she felt as if she had already dwelt for twenty years. Of one great chamber, with deep embrasured casements, she made her favourite apartment, half-studio, half-salon; and filling the embrasures with palms, and ferns, and flowers, and burning oak logs and dried rosemary on the wide hearth, and getting about her the picturesque litter of old bronzes and old brocades, of casts, and sketches, and books, made tranquilly her home in Rome.

She missed the strong intellectual life that had surrounded her in Paris, the keen and witty discussion, the versatile talents, the brilliant paradoxes, the trenchant logic of that section of the

world by which she had been surrounded; but in return she felt a dreamy and charming repose, a sense of peace and exhilaration both in one; thought was lulled and basked only in the immemorial treasures of the past; strife seemed far away, and the mere sense of physical life seemed enough.

She regretted that she had not come unknown to all the motley winter world that ever and again broke the charm of this spell which falls on every artist and every poet entering Rome. She thrust it away as often as she could, but she had celebrity, and it had curiosity, and it buzzed about her and would not be gainsaid. She would fain have shut herself alone in her frescoed rooms when she was not amongst the marbles of Vatican or Capitol, or beneath the ilexes of Borghese and Pamfili. But it is not easy to escape from the world of ordinary men and women, or to escape publicity, when you have a public name; and people were eager to visit Etoile and say that they had seen her at home, with her olive velvet skirts, and her old Flemish laces, and her background of palms, and her great dog on her hearth, and on her easel some sketch half-covered with some relic of gold brocade.

"As they must come some time, let them all come together, and not spoil the week," she said, with a shrug of her shoulders, and named Sundays for her martyrdom.

"I will not come on Sundays," murmured Ioris as he heard her say it.

Etoile smiled. "Oh yes, you will—if your sovereign-mistress order you to accompany her."

"*Plait-il?*" said Ioris, with a look of innocent unconsciousness; then added, in a low tone, "You are pleased to be cruel."

The Casa Challoner itself received on a Wednesday, making on that day a solemn religious sacrifice to the Bona Dea. It was specially swept and garnished, morally as well as actually; the pipes and cigars were locked up, the too-suggestive statuettes put out of sight; the good-looking slaves all banished; and little Effie, prettily dressed, was prominently petted by her mother; Mr. Challoner was as cordial and communicative as nature would permit him to become, and Lady Joan was as full of proper sentiments and domestic interest as if she were a penny paper or a shilling periodical. In her bevy of English dowagers, American damsels, and Scotch cousins, amidst the bankers and consuls' and merchants' wives, the small gentilities and the free-born republicans, Lady Joan was sublime: she would have been worthy the burin of Balzac and the crowquill of Thackeray.

Ioris was usually banished from these Wednesdays, but Lady Joan would generally speak of him once in five minutes. "Io's gone to get me some camellias," or "Io's gone to look at some pictures." Or she would turn over the photograph album before

Mrs. Grundy and say, "Yes, that's Io—you met him here last week. Handsome? Well, we don't think him quite that, but we're very fond of him, poor fellow."

And Mrs. Grundy would go away quite satisfied, and take her daughter on the following Wednesday; for Mrs. Grundy will suppose anything rather than it were possible for anybody to deceive herself.

"Showed me the man's likeness openly, her husband standing by and the dear Bishop," Mrs. Grundy would say afterwards. "Of course there's nothing in it—*nothing*! Do you suppose she would show me his photograph if there were? It is the purest friendship—the most perfect kindness."

All the bankers', and consuls', and merchants' wives, all the small gentilities, and the free-born republicans, who did not go to the Sundays on Montecavallo, used to compare her admirable Wednesdays, with the teapot and the small talk, to those iniquitous Sabbath-days.

"They say you can't see across the rooms for the smoke at the Comtesse Etoile's—there are all kinds of liqueurs—anybody plays and sings that likes. The Prince of Scheldt sung heaps of *café-chantant* and guard-room songs last Sunday, and imitated Teresa and then cats on the roofs—oh! scandalous, quite scandalous! They say——"

And being shut out from the Sundays, they would go and take the tea and muffins on a Wednesday, and feel what a blessing it was to move only in irreproachable society.

"Yes, I don't go on the Sundays either; at least, I go very seldom," said Lady Joan, and let a shade of regret on her frank face hint the rest.

"The Etoile Sundays are delightful," said Lady Cardiff, who did go, and was reassured that she had done quite right in going by meeting Princess Vera in the doorway, and another ambassadress a little further on. "I like her very much—I like her immensely; though she never does seem to see that Somebody is Anybody, and was contemptuous, actually *contemptuous*, to the Prince of Scheldt; while she was everything that was amiable to some horrid little snuffy creature, eighty years old, who happened to have all Beethoven and Schumann at his fingers' ends. Yes, I like her. She seems to look over one, through one, past one; and that isn't comfortable or complimentary; but she pleases me. She isn't a bit like anybody else. She makes me think of Sappho and St. Dorothea. What are you laughing at, pray?"

Ioris, despite his protest, did come now and then on the Sundays, but he came alone and rarely.

To Etoile he said: "You have said I am a slave; I will not exhibit myself with my chains on to the merciless railery of

your eyes, and—I do not care to come when others monopolise you.”

To Lady Joan he said: “Ah, *ma chère*, you know I am afraid of ‘celebrities.’ Leave me in peace. I see her too often as it is in your house for my tranquillity.”

That was no lie; but his hearer did not understand it in its true sense, and was pleased and satisfied.

“Io won’t go near her if you drag him with ropes,” she said to her watchdog, Marjory Scrope.

The watchdog, with a keener and sharper *flaire*, had already smelt danger.

And once, twice, thrice the watchdog going to copy the Rospigliosi Aurora, on an order of Lord Fingal’s, saw a tall and slender form that she knew, pass the palace-gate of Etoile in bright mornings at noontide.

CHAPTER XIII.

“BOUGHT it for eight hundred francs, and can sell it, my dear madam, for a hundred thousand, honour bright!” the O’Glenamaddy, an Irish member of Parliament, was calling out in highest glee in the Lady Joan’s morning-room. “Two men scrubbin’ the dirt off all day long, and two dozen sheets of waddin’ used already—it’s almost clane—and it’s a real great picture! What school, madam? Oh, it’s not a picture of a school at all—it’s a “Salutation to the Virgin,” madam, twelve feet by twenty. Who by? Ah, now, that I’m not shure of, but it’s a very old master. Cara—Cara—Caradoggia, I’ll be thinkin’. Count Burletta says I’d get a hundred thousand to-morrow for it aisy; but I’ll not be selling it. I’ll send it home to the ould place. It’s a wonderful place, madam, is Rome, for pickin’ up treasures in the dirt, and I cannot be grateful enough to ye for having put me in the way of doin’ it. With a little ready money, and a little knowledge, it’s wonderful what a fortune one may make. Not that I’m wantin’ one; but when one has childern there’s never too much broth in the old pot—is there, now? Only eigh hundred francs my picture!—think o’ that! Say, countin’ cleanin’, and the waddin’, a thousand all told. And lyin’ without a purchaser ever since the conquest of Italy by Bonaparte; and such a mass of soot and dust, that if your good husband hadu’t pointed out the value of it to me I’d have taken it for a chimney-board and

nothin' better. Indeed I would. What a thing it is to be clever ! And didn't ye say ye'd take me to a new shop to-morrow mornin' that ye know of?—that is, I mane, an old shop. I love an antique bronze, madam, better than anythin' in the world—mighty old, ye know, madam, and green as grass, with plenty of pattern on it."

"You mean patina," said the Lady Joan, repressing a smile. "Dear O'Glen, of course I shall be only too delighted to take you anywhere or serve you in any way; and about the picture I'm enchanted. Such a find as that don't occur once in a dozen years; and if Mr. Challoner hadn't been so fond of you he would never have let you run off with it. I'll come and see it to-morrow, and bring Io. And now you must stop for luncheon. I've got some real Southdown thyme-fed meat for you; I sent over for the breed myself. They'd such wretched, long-legged, fleshless beasts at Fiordelisa when I went there first! *Now* our mutton fetches far and away the first price in the market; indeed, Spillman buys it up always."

"What a treasure of a woman ye are!" sighed the O'Glenamaddy. "Ye know everything, from antiquity to mutton! Quite amazin'! Ah, sir, ye've drawn a prize indeed in your marryin'; and few prizes it is that there are!"

Mr. Challoner bowed—gratified.

The O'Glenamaddy could not stop for the mutton, being very busy, and post-haste on his way back for the opening of the Dublin season; and the Lady Joan was not ill-pleased that he could not. The O'Glenamaddy was a delightful person, of a childlike faith and an elastic purse, but she had had enough of him. Moreover, she expected Etoile to luncheon, having organised a party to the Grotto of Egeria, and she would not have cared for her to hear of the Salutation to the Virgin and the sheets of wadding.

She herself was in high spirits, having received a rather chillily-worded invitation for herself and husband, and their friend the Prince Ioris, to go up and breakfast with her mighty cousins the Hebrides, who had just come to their big villa outside by the Porta Pia. But she did not mind its being chilly; it would serve her purpose as well as if it were warm. A single invitation to breakfast or dinner at the Countess of Hebrides' always filled Mrs. Grundy's mouth with sweetmeats and silence safely for the season. True, neither the Earl nor the Countess of Hebrides liked her, and asked her as little and as coldly as possible to their house. But what of that?

Lady Joan floated herself by means of her big relations as swimmers in a storm by air-belts. Cousins very near to her might come to study art in Rome; but if they studied it in humble dwellings, and had no taste or figure for Society, their

relationship was sternly rejected at the Casa Challoner. But when cousins removed twice a hundred times, as Scotch cousins can be, came with pretty handles to their names, and cousins at the great hotels, the hospitality of the Casa Challoner was truly Highland in its lavishness, and a series of excellent dinner-parties proclaimed the new arrival and the near relationship to the city.

Nothing could exceed the cordial good understanding of Mr. Challoner and his wife at such times as these. They walked together, drove together, never spoke without a smile, and called each other "my love" and "my dear" with the most excellent reciprocity.

The Countess of Hebrides, who had always wondered at the odd marriage "Archie's daughter" had made, was obliged to concede that the *mésalliance* had turned out better than might have been feared, and that the husband seemed a good creature; and so let the good creature make purchases for her in Etruscan jewellery, and Castellani necklaces, and Roman antiquities, and modern Fortunys and Tito Contis.

The mighty Hebrides never stayed very long at a time; but these great people are like the sun, and leave a trail of glory behind them long after they have passed out of sight.

The afterglow of them rested on the Casa Challoner and gilded it like the Ark of the Covenant in the sight of all the artists and journalists, and *bric-à-brac* collectors, and transatlantic wayfarers who made the sum of their daily society, and who drifted perpetually in and out of their hospitable chambers, and who in return defended everywhere the Challoner reputation with as much ardour and perhaps as little discretion as they defended a doubtful Guercino that they wanted to sell, or an antique Pausanias, of which everything was modern except the right ear.

The English society of Winter Cities is motley. There are two parts to it: the small fish that always live in the foreign water, and the bigger fish that only float through it. The fish that live in the water, who for the most part have mould on their backs of some "story" or another, and cannot well live in their own native streams, vie with each other for the big fish that only come to tarry for a season, with all the glory of diamond-bright scales upon them, and all their signet-marks as monarchs of the deep. When a big fish arrives, the little fish all rush to catch the shadow of his glory; and there are no bigger fish anywhere than these salmon from north of Tweed with which the Lady Joan claimed kinship.

And it was her mighty skill in catching these big fish that kept herself in smooth waters.

Mrs. Maeserip, the banker's wife, whose father had driven a wheelbarrow and wielded an auctioneer's hammer in New York,

would not quarrel with a woman who could ask her to luncheon with that very great lady the Countess of Hebrides. Mrs. Middleway, the evangelical pastor's better half, could only eagerly return calls that brought her into the same chambers with that really noble and Christian gentleman, Lord Fingal; and all the rest of the little people who were the mouthpieces of that irresistible potentate Mrs. Grundy would not be either cold or censorious on any one who could call half the Peerage "my cousins."

Lady Joan pleased Mrs. Grundy, and most other women, for many reasons.

First of all, she was indisputably a lady in her own right and a Perth-Douglas; and besides, there was that floating impression that she had something to hide, and something to fear, which enabled them to feel above her level. Water may like to find its own level, but women do not. Again, she took extreme trouble to conciliate her own sex. She was morbidly anxious about their estimate of her; her braggadocio often veiled a quaking pulse. For women she hung her Christmas-tree with pretty trifles; for women she bought tickets at charity balls, and gave them lavishly away to large families of marriageable daughters; for women she gave her carefully calculated dinners when a duke's eldest son or a rich unmarried commoner was passing through Rome; for women, indeed, she would even go so far as to find amongst all her *robes* a few lengths of real old Venetian lace, or a genuine rococo locket, and let some happy fair one go off with it really at a bargain. And all this study and self-sacrifice brought her in a rich harvest.

For any harvest is rich to us that is the one of our desire; and the light of Lady Joan's eyes was her own face reflected in a Louis Quinze mirror at some great banker's ball, and her own name inscribed on the books of some hotel where some royal princess was staying; her own Delft card-plate filled with polished pasteboard, and her own little drawing-room packed with persons who were Personages.

Throughout Society there is everywhere to be met with a large class of well-born people who want perpetual amusement and cannot pay for it. They are the offshoots of the nobilities of nations, the flowers that are next the rose; the fringes of the purples; the crumb of the cake. They are nicely mannered, frothily educated, have tastes wider than their purses, are utterly useless, and like to be amused from one year's end to the other without its costing them greatly. They like to use other people's carriages, to have other people's opera-boxes, to dine out constantly, to get innumerable pleasantnesses without having their pride hurt by any approach to patronage; because they are gentlefolks—always gentlefolks—only they like life to be a merry-go-round on other people's horses.

It is a large class, and a gay one, and an amiable one, and a very grateful one—so long as you are able to entertain it. When the day comes that you cannot do so it will forget you—that is all.

It will not be bitter about you : it has not mind enough for that ; it will only forget you. It is always enjoying itself.

It is a class which abounds in all cities of pleasure ; and its suffrages are to be bought. What pleases it, it will praise ; and these praises are like little puffs of south wind : they will send up a monster balloon like a soap-bubble, if only there be but enough of them.

The Lady Joan, who had been born amongst the purples, but had been forced to live amongst its fringes, courted this numerous class, and succeeded with it.

"I took Io to my dear Hebrides ; they're so fond of him !" she would be able to say for a twelvemonth ; so she thought to herself now, receiving the Hebrides invitation ; and in her mind's eye she could see all the bankers', and consuls', and merchants' wives, all the little gentilities, and all the freeborn Americans, running about, and saying with unctuous lips, "She took him to the Hebrides' ! How *can* there be anything in it ?"

And if ever Lady Joan blessed Providence she blessed it for Scotch consinship.

At this moment, however, she put aside both the great Hebrides, and the Salutation to the Virgin, and arrayed herself in the character she always wore for Voightel's friend.

She wore many characters, according to her spectators. For the great Scotch consins she was a very happy and virtuous wife ; ill-placed, indeed, in a social position unworthy of her, but with qualities that would have graced a duchess's coronet. To the world in general she was a much-enduring and much-forgiving martyr ; a sacrifice made by her family to the golden calf, and heroically pressing the knife of sacrifice meekly to her bosom. To a chosen few she was an adventurous, devil-may-care, high-spirited creature, who threw her cap over the mill and didn't care who saw it in the air. To herself she was a combination of fine mind and fearless nature, a sort of Madame Tallien dashed with the virile vigour of a Lady of Lathom.

But even the chosen few never saw her as she actually was, and it may certainly be averred that she herself never did. She thought she had a will of iron, a brain of steel, a dauntless courage, and a matchless wit. She never dreamed that she was after all only a terrible coward at heart, disguised in a fine swagger like Pistol's, having neither the force in her to defy society nor the force in her to deny her passions.

At this moment she arrayed herself in the part that she always thought most appropriate for receiving a person who

knew Voightel and lived in Paris, and did her best to seem to Etoile a clever, brilliant woman of the world, with honest outspokenness of tongue and fearless utterances of advanced thought, yet one that never affected to be altogether above the mundane amusements of a pleasant society that adored her as one of its leaders.

"So delighted to see you; so kind of you to come!" she cried, with that cordiality of welcome which looked so real when she did not upset it with a bit of rudeness or bad temper. "You are always with Princess Vera, aren't you? How can you condescend to such small folks as we are? But I'm charmed that you *do*. Will a feminine Velasquez like yourself deign to help me in a most important question? Look here at all these old plates. Io's brought them for me to pick out a costume for the Clams' fancy ball. What do you say to this—or this? They're all very stiff, but that style rather suits me, I think, and I've lots of brocade doing nothing. Don't you think this one, if it were made of ruby velvet, and the stomacher sewn with seed-pearls? I bought a lot the other day. And the ruff will be becoming. And I've heaps of old Venetian prints. Io says these plates aren't correct. He's some old family portrait he wants me to dress like. You know he's such a fidget about historical accuracy. He made himself wretched the other night because my Louis Treize costume had eighteenth century buttons on it and lace only fifty years old. He said I was a dancing anachronism. Good gracious! here he is—come to luncheon, actually—a thing he never does. That's because *you're* here! My dear Io, can't you throw your coat down without breaking those tulips all to pieces?"

The fallen petals of the tulips made her eyes darken angrily. Why did he come to luncheon when he was not ordered? Of course when ordered he had to come, no matter how inconvenient to himself; but any sign of an independent will in him was a glimpse of that cloven hoof of rebellion which she had believed that she had crushed under for ever.

When he rebelled she always made him ridiculous. Before he could speak she tossed him the costume drawings.

"Here, Comtesse Etoile has chosen this dress for me," she called to him. "Take a pencil and write out what the stuff and all ought to be on the margin, and then Mariannina can follow your notes. Have you been to the Palmiro sale? I hope to goodness you didn't let that Capo di Monte slip through your fingers. Has Davis's agent got it? Oh, good heavens, Io, what a fool you are! I knew how it would be if I didn't go myself! Mr. Challoner 'll be furious. There'll be no peace for a week. It's always so when you do anything alone."

"*Ma chère*, the person from London——" began Ioris. But she never indulged him by hearing his explanations.

"Nonsense. Of course Davis's agent got it if you weren't quick enough. Don't talk rubbish. You know well enough I'd told you to get it at any price—any price. It will fetch hundreds in Pall Mall. All the rest of the Palmiro things were trash, but that was worth any money. But it's always so when you go alone. Have you had those grapes and woodcocks sent up to the Hebrides? Did you send to Fiordelisa for the camellias for to-night? And have you told 'em to blister Pippo? Oh, you'll be going to the stable to sit with him. What do you think he did do?" she pursued, turning to Etoile. "When his old mare was blistered last summer he stayed with her all day long, because he thought she felt the pain less if he stroked her! I believe he'll want to give the hares and foxes anaesthetics before we shoot 'em next! There he was all day long in the mare's stall, reading Giusti and stroking her neck. He wore mourning when the old beast died."

"Oh!—*carissima mia!*——"

"Oh, you know you did, or you wanted to, if I hadn't laughed at you. Now, write those notes clear, so that Marianina can read 'em. Ruby velvet, and just a touch here and there of gold. I want to use up that *lume d'oro* we got in the Ghetto. The stomacher isn't cut right? Well, draw it the shape it should be. Shall it be sewn with seed-pearls or Turkish sequins? Oh, pearls, I think. We bought all those ropes of 'em the other day, and I may as well wear 'em before——"

"Before we sell them again," she was going to say; but instead, as Etoile was there, substituted a less tell-tale phrase.

"Before I get sick of the sight of them, lying about in that dish. One does get sick of pearls so soon. Now, diamonds never pall on you. They seem always changing. When a fairy sends me anything for my birthday, I wish she'd always send me diamonds."

Ioris sighed. He knew what that meant. And diamonds cost money, and he was not rich. He sketched the Venetian costume obediently in silence. Lady Joan walked over to him and rested one hand on his shoulder, and with the other stroked back the dark hair of his head as it was bent over the drawing.

All the while she looked at Etoile furtively, as though by the action she would say, "Take care what you do. This is mine."

Ioris moved under her touch a little petulantly. He went on drawing without response.

Etoile looked at him through dreaming eyes; that delicate aquiline profile against the high crimson lights of the wall-hangings had a fascination for her as for all artists. For the moment she felt a sense of disgust to see those strong, firm,

sinewy hands clasped on his shoulder like a hand that holds, and holds, for ever. She rose and turned from the sight, and went to a little Albano hanging near.

Ioris threw his pencil away broken.

"It is of no use drawing on that wretched paper," he said, displacing the hand that was on his shoulder by a quick and, as it seemed, accidental manœuvre. "I will send you the costume later. It will be much easier to copy at once that Venetian portrait I told you of; you shall have it by to-morrow morning."

"Luncheon is ready," said the Lady Joan curtly, and she went in without ceremony to her dining-room, where she scolded her little girl for having put on silk when she ought to have put on merino, and did a battle-royal with her husband about the disputed frock. Of course she did not care a rush about the frock, but the fierce disputation did her good. The child was brought up on very simple principles. What her father ordered her mother forbade, and what her mother commanded her father refused. The child had quickly learned how to get all she wanted by the mere process of pitting them one against each other.

"Mamma will let me have it, because papa can't bear me to," she would say to her little companions, with questionable grammar but the unquestionable principles proper to a young daughter of a house whose foundation-stone was the Triangle of Dumas.

All through luncheon Lady Joan descanted on the extravagance of the offending frock and the injury done to her by the loss of the Capo di Monte to Davis.

She was a woman whose passions, like the fires in Vesuvius, threw up much smoke and many stones.

Ioris talked of literature and art, ate only a few of his own grapes, and for once disregarded his hostess.

Mr. Challoner, who always listened and watched impassive as Fate and as immutable, commenting on all things, and interfering in none, like the Chorus to a Greek play—Mr. Challoner thought to himself that his own vengeance was dawning.

But after all Mr. Challoner was a man of the world. Things were better for him as they were. Peace is a calmer thing than revenge—especially when peace means that some one else is worried instead of yourself, and revenge means that you will be left all alone to bear the beating of the storm.

Mr. Challoner, as a student of human nature and a mere mortal man, could not but enjoy the prevision that Ioris was drifting unconsciously away into love elsewhere. But Mr. Challoner, as a *mari complaisant* and a philosopher, knew that

this drifting away would be a fatal blow to his own rest and tranquillity.

Solomon thought a dinner of herbs with quietness better than a stalled ox and contention; but modern men and women, who have no fancy for herbs in these days, unless mixed with sherry and soles by an excellent cook, contrive by these tacit and amicable arrangements to obtain both the ox and the quietness.

Compromise is the note of the present century and the choice of all wise men. Arbitration instead of arms; damages instead of vengeance; give-and-take instead of cut-and-thrust; universal doubt and polite suspicion instead of frank faith or stout denial. Compromise everywhere, caretaking, timorous, shrewd, dubious, apprehensive, wise: compromise is the supreme art of the nineteenth century.

Mr. Challoner and his wife studied this great theory to perfection; and it was only because they, like the greatest of mortals, were human that they sometimes forgot its rule so far as to quarrel about their shares of a picture's profits or fling their respective secrets at each other's head. This was very seldom; and besides, what did it matter? It was only when nobody else was there.

"You think me very insincere?" murmured Ioris to Etoile, a quarter of an hour later.

"Insincere? What have I said?"

"In words nothing. Your eyes say it."

"My eyes are very ill-bred, then."

"Nay, tell me the truth."

"Well, I should think you were very frank by nature, but are somewhat false from habit."

"And what makes you suppose that?"

"How can I tell? Artists, you see, are like dogs: they go by instinct, and draw deductions without being aware of it. We are unreasonable animals, not fit for drawing-rooms."

"But what should make you imagine me insincere?"

She laughed at his persistency.

"Well, do you not always call your friend '*ma chère*' when I only am with you both, and most ceremoniously '*Madame*' when other people are by?"

"Oh, that is only friendship. You must not infer more than they mean from such little slips of the tongue."

"I infer just what they do mean—no more."

Ioris smiled. A man cannot help smiling when one woman talks to him of his position with another. It is not vanity; it is recollection and anticipation combined.

"You are very mischievous, madame," he answered airily. "Perhaps one does learn to lie in the world. Society has made

falsehood its axletree, and cannot well turn round without it. But I do not think I ever should lie to you."

"Why? What is there about me? I am not like your old stone Bocca della Verita, to bite the hand off all false speakers."

"No, you are something much better," he said abruptly. "You are one of those women who shame men into truth."

His eyes dwelt on her with earnestness, with warmth, with a passing sadness. He touched her hand with that hesitating timidity, which in him was as successful with women as audacity. His fingers closed on hers one moment with a sort of supplication in the gentleness of the action.

They were standing in the anteroom of the Casa Challoner. Lady Joan came through the oriental curtain dividing the rooms; and saw.

Her brows contracted, but she gave no other sign of anger.

"Are you people ready?" she cried, in her cordial and ringing voice; she had planned a drive to show her guest the Caffarella. "My dear Comtesse, have you got enough on? You know it grows awfully cold at twilight. I was afraid Mr. Challoner would insist on our having his company; but the dear Dean has carried him off to the English schools. Heaven be praised for all its small mercies. You'd never forget it if you heard him prose about Numa. 'Numa never existed at all.' Well, settle it so and have done with it, I say. But not a bit of it; he'll preach on for three hours and a half to prove that Numa was moonshine. As if anybody could prove a negation! Call for Eccelino. We'll take him up at the Circle, I promised him; and the other men rode on before. Take heaps of cigars, Io. How *could* you lose that Capo di Monte to-day? It makes me so savage. You are like a baby in some things. I do believe if it wasn't for me you'd be ruined to-morrow, and have to sit on the Spanish Steps to get halfpence. Let's be off, or we shall have all the daylight gone."

And Lady Joan showed herself solicitous as she got into the carriage that her guest should be protected by scarfs and furs against the hard wind blowing from the Appenines, with all the frank and pleasant cordiality that a wise woman displays when she has a grudge to pay off—by-and-by.

Lady Joan laughed and talked her brightest as they rolled along; and when she chose she could be very agreeable in a cheerful and offhand fashion, which won her much admiration amongst that large proportion of society which thinks good spirits a pretty compliment to itself. She had seen a great deal of men and manners; she had seen most cities and some few courts; she read human nature well, though narrowly; she could tell a tale with point and humour, especially when it had in it a flavour of broad mirth. Within herself she was deeply

incensed at what she had seen and heard. But then she reasoned, Io could only have been making game of that stuck-up adventuress : he disliked Etoile ; he had always said so. So she was very amiable to Etoile as they drove to the Grotto of Egeria, and did not chastise her lover more severely than by bestowing all her smiles on Eccelino di Sestri, a good-looking courtier, who had adored herself *dans le temps*.

"Io's my friend, of course, just as Eccelino is," she would say in her most candid manner. It was a distinguishing feature of Lady Joan's administrative capabilities that she could keep men together without their quarrelling about her. Perhaps the reason was that she let each of them think that she cheated for him all the others ; or perhaps the reason was that the love she inspired was not of the strongest kind.

The carriage went out by the Albano road, under the leafless elm trees, to the silent places where Egeria's altar lies fallen under the green pall of the ivy and the wild waterfled moss.

The sun was still high, the sky cloudless, and the north wind dropped as they entered the valley of the Almo.

"No doubt that unhappy Numa, if he ever did exist, must have been awfully bullied by his wife ; I should think she was a scold ; and the length of her tongue made him adore the Muse of Silence as much as I do when Mr. Challoner vouchsafes one of his historical orations," said Lady Joan, with her bright laugh, as she got out of her carriage, sauntered down into the dell, lighted her cigar, and pitched stones at the fallen statue that lies like a dead thing beneath the arching rock.

"All lovers adore that Muse. Numa was only like all of us there," said the Count di Sestri.

"Do they ? I don't know anything about lovers ; I only care for friends," laughed the Lady Joan, with her cigarette in her white teeth. She, for her own part, did not adore Silence at any time, and in her own heart considered that it was of no use being made love to at all unless you could publish the triumph of it right and left to your society. She liked to fasten her lover to her skirts as she pinned a signal-ribbon to her domino at the Veglione. She was not a woman to let her Romeo go from her when the lark sang ; on the contrary, she liked all the cocks in the neighbourhood to crow their shrillest and call attention to him on her balcony ; though, of course, she would say to the cocks, like the cat in the *Animaux Parlants*, "*Je suis une chatte anglaise et je n'ai point d'amants !*" None of the animals believed the cat, certainly. Still in its way the cry was useful.

Ioris went forward and gathered a sprig of broom and a few sprays of maidenhair fern, and gave them to Etoile.

"Juvenal would be satisfied, I suppose. He hated the costly marbles and the artificial ornamentation ; there is little enough left of them now. I am sure you, too, like it best as it is ?"

"Yes, the bubbling brook sings the fittest song for Egeria; and poor Tatia, too, whose shade must have been so jealous of her. I am sure she never cared for all her mortal rivals in the new city on the hills there, but Egeria must have made her heart ache; Egeria, who came on the wings of the wind as she did herself, and came into her own temple to take his very soul away——"

"Have you ever loved any one, I wonder?" thought the Lady Joan, turning and looking at her with a sudden thought.

"Egeria also forgave even disloyalty," said Ioris aloud. "No infidelity changed her. She was faithful to him through death and after it."

Etoile smiled.

"Which is only to say I should think that the nymph was a woman after all."

"How little you know of women!"

"Don't turn cynic, Io," cried Lady Joan, flinging her cigar end at the mutilated statue. "It won't suit you at all. You are naturally a cross between Faust and the young man in the *Peau de Chagrin*; between Romeo and Reuben, unstable as water, etc.—you know what I mean. You are as credulous as a seal and as soft-hearted as a dog: cynicism is for men who drink brandy, beat their wives, wear long beards, and never wash their hands. Nature made *you*——"

But he lost this definition of his character, as he had wandered away after Etoile, who had gone further down to where the little stream bubbled up amongst the mosses that had once been Numa's bed.

Lady Joan glanced after them, and lit a new cigarette. She knew passion and all its ways too well not to know the meaning of that silent unconscious irresistible magnetism which draws two unfamiliar lives one to another in the indefinable physical attraction which is the birth of love. But her natural quickness of intelligence was obscured by her overweening vanity.

"He is only fooling her," she thought with indifference and amusement. "After all, if he like to do that, let him."

If another woman were made to love her lover hopelessly, that would be only so much additional entertainment for herself. She was so sure of him—as sure as she was of the ring on her hand, that would stay there for ever unless she threw it aside.

"Ioris seems to admire that new comer," said the Count Eccelino.

"Oh dear, no, he doesn't," said Lady Joan coolly. "He rather dislikes her; thinks her insolent and *tête montée*. But I've told him to be agreeable to her. She is a great favourite of Voightel's. You know dear old Voightel, the cleverest man in all Europe. We were so fond of him long ago at Damascus."

Of course he was only fooling Etoile, she said to herself, glancing, as she laughed with the other men about her, at the two figures that had strayed away side by side under the shadows of the trees along the stream towards the ruins that tradition allies with the memory of Volumnia and Virgilia, and with the great cry from the breaking heart of the hero :

“I melt, and am not
Of stronger earth than others.”

Of course he was only fooling Etoile; he disliked her, so he had said a score of times; nevertheless that solitary walk displeased her.

“Who is she? I haven’t an idea,” she said roughly to another question of Eccelino di Sestri’s. “Of course she’s known all the world over for that matter, by name; but as to where she came from, I should be very sorry to have to answer for that. These kind of people always drop down from the moon, or say they do, to demonstrate that they didn’t jump up from the otter.”

“But she is a Countess d’Avesnes.”

“Yes. That’s her name, or she says it is. It sounds very aristocratic; but I don’t much believe myself in aristocracy that has no relations, and travels about with a big dog, and has the knowledge of Manon Lescaut, with the innocent airs of Una. Men like that sort of thing; they believe in naked feet walking over hot ploughshares without a burn. We don’t. We’re more consistent. We don’t look for daisies on dung-heaps. It’s rubbish, you know. After all, think what that woman has seen! I don’t say there’s any real harm in her; Voightel would not have sent her to *me* if there had been, of course; but it’s perfectly ridiculous to suppose that she has the white-paper-past that she pretends to have. She’s very clever, that everybody knows; and a very clever woman can’t be a very innocent one—when she’s an artist, I mean.”

The Lady Joan concluded with a puff of smoke up into the traceries of the ash-boughs overhead, for she remembered that she always pictured herself to her world as combining in her own person the two excellences which she had just declared to be incapable of co-existence.

“*Calomniez, calomniez!*” said Voltaire; “*calomniez toujours : quelque chose restera.*”

So the Lady Joan was of opinion that if you only lie everlastingly, something of it all will always be believed somewhere.

If you are only well beforehand with your falsehood all will go upon velvet; nobody ever listens to a rectification. “Is it possible?” everybody cries with eager zest; but when they have only to say “Oh, wasn’t it so?” nobody feels any particular interest. It is the first statement that has the swing and the

success; as for explanation or retraction—pooh!—who cares to be bored?

She knew very well that what she said was not true. But Lady Joan knew also that a little fiction always came in handy.

Besides, when Ioris had wandered away without permission along the bend of the water, it was only human nature to fling a stone after his companion.

Moreover, she was really incredulous that any one with such opportunities for amusement as Etoile had possessed, could have been idiot enough to have led as quiet a life as a rosebush in a nun's lattice window.

Men might believe it. But she was not to be taken in by any such nonsense.

Fame to a woman is like the *tunica incendialis* of the Latin martyrs, and it is never the fault of other women like the Lady Joan, if the torches of slander do not set it ablaze till the sulphur flames burn up the life within.

She smiled her sunniest and kindest, however, when the truants returned from the temple of Fortuna Mutabilis, as the first shadow of sunset fell over the grass.

"My dear! are you not afraid of the cold?" she said affectionately to Etoile. "We must be moving, I fear, and leave the ghost of Egeria to salute the moon all alone. You must come back to dinner with us. Oh yes, you must! I wish you would go to the masquerade with me; but you care so little for those things. You don't get half out of life that you might, believe me. However, I suppose, in return for all you lose, primroses talk to you, and stones have voices, and all that kind of thing. I've more of the Peter Bell in *me*. Give me my furs, Io; and call up the carriage. Oh, of course she'll come to dinner—I won't take any refusal. Mr. Challoner will discourse of nothing but Numa, unless we're strong enough in number to talk him down. Of all the cants, I do think that new cant of proving that nothing ever was, and that nobody ever lived, is the very worst bore that sceptical education has developed. Five o'clock! Tell them to drive fast. I shall take you home to dinner too, Eccelino; and I'll give you the cotillon to-morrow night if you're good at the Maeserips."

Count Eccelino bowed his ceremonious thanks with an air of ardent gratitude. But he was too used to receive favours of this sort whenever his friend was out of favour to be much flattered by them actually. As a punishment they were also lost upon Ioris, who, as they drove homeward, was silent, letting his dark eyes brood softly upon the face of Etoile, so that whenever she looked up she met their gaze in the pensive Roman twilight.

She persisted in not dining with them that night, and went

to her own room and sat and dreamed, with her head on her hands, over a fire of oak and pine.

"That man is not happy," she thought again and again; and she seemed always to feel that tender hesitating touch of his fingers, always to see those eloquent and wistful eyes in the evening shadows.

Meanwhile Lady Joan went home and dined, and then "mystified" herself in loup and domino for that first Veglione of the year.

She had a passion for masquerades. No scrutiny of marital wrath drew her to heed the secrecy of that most dingy and prosaic of all Venusbergs—a *baignoir au troisième*. No weak objections on the part of her lord to any pastimes of friendship drove her, as they drive some ill-used wives, to require the shelter of one of those little close-curtained cloth-hung closets, where the poor god of love is huddled up in a black sacque, and his rosy mouth soiled with champagne-cup. She could go home with her escort at four or five in the morning, and use her latch-key, and Mr. Challoner, like a sensible sleeper, only turned cosily in his bed at the back of the house, and, if he woke at all at the sound of his hall-door's unclosing, only thought what a fool the other man was to have danced attendance through all those hours in the noise and the heat of that dingy festival.

Lady Joan had no need of masquerades. With her latch-key in her pocket, and her friend's cab at her command, she could come and go, alone or accompanied, in that happy freedom which is the privilege of a perfect conjugal comprehension. The cabman knew much more about her than Mr. Challoner.

But though she had no need of them, her soul adored the Veglione. That dance Macabre was the delight of her heart, as the Brumalia of the Roman matron's.

To mystify herself, or think she did so; to laugh louder than with due regard to society she ever could elsewhere; to throw a stone and grin undiscovered and pass on; to fasten strangers with her shining eyes, and jeer at them and leave them; to torment her friends and torture her foes, and sup and smoke and go home in the daybreak, when the masks were all reeling up the streets and the carnival songs were greeting the sunrise—that was pleasure to the Lady Joan.

It requited her for a hundred dismal clerical luncheons off cold lamb and lettuce, with chaplains and consuls; it fortified her against a thousand big dinners with her tongue tied, and her "dear Robert" at the bottom of the table.

Ioris sighed this evening as he fastened her mask behind her ears and went down with her into the dingy whirlpool. He was so tired of it all.

The thin disguises, the stupid jokes, the commonplace

intrigues, the coarse pretence of deceiving and of being deceived, the noise, the uproar, the shrill cries, the headlong dances—they had grown so tiresome. He had laughed his lightest and waltzed his wildest in other years; but he was tired of it all—very tired—now as he walked about amongst the screaming crowd, and exchanged the vapid phrases of custom, with dominoes that were as well known to him as though he had met them in broad day; and heard the resonant voice of his empress ring loud above the music in merciless speech and worn-out jibes; and lighted her cigarettes, and carried her fan, and got her her claret-cup, and thought how long the night was—the boisterous, empty, joyless, senseless night, through which, all the while, he had to laugh and be ready with answer, and look amused, and turn an airy compliment, and join in all the mirth, and never show a yawn, but wait on duty till the kindly sun should rise, and so release him.

What weariness will men endure if only it be not in the name of virtue!

“A fine long night, Excellence!” said the cabman, with a radiant smile, as Ioris paid him while the bells of the first mass rung in the dawn.

“A terrible long night,” thought his employer, looking up at the blue morning skies.

The cabman, who, had he ever been cross-questioned by Society, could have rendered the clerical cold lamb for ever a Passover of the past to the Casa Challoner, drove away joyous to get his breakfast and gamble in the sun. Ioris went upstairs and shut the sun out, and threw himself on his bed.

“Good God! once I thought this, pleasure!” he murmured as his heavy eyelids fell.

So he had thought this—love.

CHAPTER XIV.

"CHÈRE COMTESSE ETOILE, pardon me, but you sow the earth with dragon's teeth!" said Lady Cardiff one morning, about four o'clock, on the Pincio. "You cannot want enemies; you really cannot *want* them—you must have so many. I don't wish to be rude, you know, but you must. Whoever shines, etc. Why will you make so many unnecessary ones? Do tell me."

"What have I done?" said Etoile with amazement and a little absently. She was thinking of things that Ioris had said the night before in the Palazzo Farnese, where there had been an early reception.

"Done?" echoed Lady Cardiff. "Why, you have cut our beloved Mrs. Henry V. Clams *dead*! Unconsciously, I dare say, but still dead. You looked at her as you did it; you did really. I must say so if they ask me."

"I did not see her," said Etoile. "Not that I should be unwilling to commit the crime consciously, if you mean that."

"Good gracious! Has she offended you?"

"Not in the least; but why should I know her? She is far less educated than my maid, and very many times more vulgar."

"Of course; but still why?"

"With a vulgarity more blatant for the fine clothes it is dressed in; a vulgarity that is not even redeemed by mere decency."

Lady Cardiff shifted her sunshade.

"Terribly strongly you put things; of course they sound horrible when you put them like that. But everybody knows her. It's a way we've got into nowadays. Why don't you write a comedy like *l'Etrangère* or the *Famille Benoiton*, and put all that into it? We should applaud it on the stage; but it only sounds uncomfortable off;—you don't mind my saying what I think?"

"Pray always say what you think. Would you continue to know Mrs. Henry V. Clams if her husband were ruined to-morrow?"

"Goodness me! of course not; and she would never expect it—never. She does know her place. There is nothing like a free and independent citizen for taking slights good-temperedly. I never knew *how* much kicking a human being would stand until I knew these born-democrats. One didn't know them

twenty years ago. I don't know why we didn't. They hadn't struck oil, I suppose, and made it worth our while; or Worth hadn't dressed them, and they were still mere natural tar and feathers. Somehow we didn't know them. Perhaps they hadn't come over to 'Europe.' Know her if she were ruined? The idea! You might as well ask would Fontebranda continue to *filer le parfait amour*."

"Poor woman!" said Etoile.

"You needn't pity her, my dear. You may be quite sure she knows quite well the terms on which she has my visits and his devotion. If all the 'red cents' went to-morrow I dare say she'd go back across the water and 'keep a bar' very happily. The days of strong objections and strong emotions are alike over, believe me. As for you, you are exactly like Molière's *Misanthrope*; I shall call you *Alceste*—

'Etre franc et sincère est mon plus grand talent,
Je ne sais point jouer les hommes en parlant,
Et qui n'a pas le don de cacher ce qu'il pense,
Doit faire en ce pays fort peu de résidence.'

Dear me! why will people go on writing? As if Molière and Fielding between them hadn't said all that there is to be said better than any one else ever can say it! By-the-by, why wouldn't you go to the *Echéance* ball?"

"I dislike balls."

"Very well; if you dislike dancing, don't dance; though if a woman don't, you know, they always think she has got a short leg, or a cork leg, or something or other that's dreadful. But why not show yourself at them? At least show yourself. One goes to balls as one goes to church. It's a social muster, and not to be there looks odd. I wish you had gone. Our dear Joan was in great force there; her Io behind her chair at supper, and she sending him about here, there, and everywhere to do this, that, and the other. 'Io, hand that mayonnaise.' 'Io, take Lady Cardiff that chicken.' 'Io, reach me those strawberries.' You should have heard her! I grinned and everybody grinned;—except that admirable wooden husband. She'd got a fine set of sapphires on, and told five different histories in my hearing of how she did get 'em. Do you happen to know where she did? 'Io' does, I suppose. She wanted us all to take shares in some Society for the Diffusion of Rabbits over the Campagna. It seems there are no rabbits in Italy. I never noticed it, did you? And we're all to repair this omission of Nature and make a fortune out of their tails (I think it's their tails); and there is no risk whatever, she says; it's to be all pure profit. Clever creature! She really is great fun. Half her life is spent in being so dreadfully afraid people should think she

has a lover, and the other half is spent in being so dreadfully afraid people should think she *hasn't*! I left her at the ball, and I didn't come away till five. Poor 'Io' looked very much bored, I thought. What a very queer thing love is!"

Etoile was silent. She was thinking of him, as he had been at the Palazzo Farnese earlier in the same evening. She felt angered—unreasonably angered that he had gone later to this ball.

"Not that it's hardly ever more than the mere question of a *quid pro quo*," continued Lady Cardiff, looking up into the pink dome of her point-lace parasol; "a give-and-take partnership of vanity and convenience. Throw in with the selfishness of this vanity, the mere animal selfishness of the senses, and weld them with the adhering force of habit, and you have the only form of love that is known to nine-tenths of our men and women. Passion is a dead letter to them. It would scare them out of their lives. They know no more of it than they do of God, and think no more of it than they do of their graves. Modern love is like modern furniture, very showy and sold at a long price, but all veneer. Pray, how is your friend with the *grande passion* that sends its object to the frosty Caucasus? I saw in yesterday's *Galignani* that Fédor Souroff had been badly wounded in some mountain skirmish. Is that true? Yes? Dear me! Now, if he had only taken a fancy to Mrs. Henry V. Clams or our dear Joan, nothing of that would have happened to him. It's a caution, as Mrs. Henry would say. Ah, there's General Desart and Mrs. Desart, and Buonretiro. Pretty woman still, ain't she? Been flirting fifteen years straight through, and as 'fit' now as ever she was. They are two of the pillars of the Casa Challoner. General Desart believes in Mr. Challoner as one man of honour believes in another. There's nothing so charming as the amiability of any unamiable people when they occupy the same position, and that a ticklish one. 'Ca' me and I'll ea' thee,' is ever present in their minds. General Desart declares he is ready to put his hand in the fire if Ioris is anything he oughtn't to be, etc., etc.; and Mr. Challoner is ready to put his hand in the fire if Buonretiro is anything he oughtn't to be, etc., etc. Beautiful reciprocity of faith! Ah, my dear General, how do? Lovely weather, isn't it? Charlie gone back to Eton? Handsome boy. How do, dear? How well you look! You miss Charlie? To be sure, to be sure. One always misses schoolboys, if only by the preternatural stillness of the house when they're gone. Shall I see you at the Japanese Embassy to-night?"

With a few pleasant words Lady Cardiff bade the Desarts adieu, and sailed on under the palm that once saw Augustan Rome.

By the toy-kiosque, they met again Mrs. Henry V. Clams and the Marquis Fontebranda; reaching the summer-house, they encountered the great Duchess of Bridgewater, with her shadow, Lord Dauntless, who were on the eve of hastening home, one to the Court, and the other to the Commons; by the water-clock they saw that leader of fashion the Baroness de Bruges, with young Ferrara, who had a face like the Dolce Christ, and was twenty years her junior; feeding the swans was lively Lady Eyebright, who cheated at cards and had her ears boxed, but was highly esteemed nevertheless, because she was believed to have compromised herself with a very high personage, and to have heaps of his letters, very ill spelt. Nearer the wall, looking at the sunset and her neighbours' gowns alternately, was Princess Gregarine, whom men called "*Les vices sympathiques*;" ugly as a Kaffir, charming as a syren, who called herself the best dressed gorilla in Europe, and whose caprices ranged from Grand Dukes to Corporals of the Guard, and, except for superiority of plunder, preferred the latter.

"Delightful age we live in," said Lady Cardiff, when she had nodded to them all, and stopped for her last chat, and was going towards her carriage. "Such dear, virtuous women all these are, and so funny it is to see them where Messalina used to make an idiot of herself with Silius! Poor Messalina! She was but a primitive creature, and knew no better than to exhibit herself in the streets; and Claudius was an easy husband, and uxorious. Yet he did cut up rough at last; Mr. Challoner and General Desart, Bridgewater and Gregarine, never will. It has been reserved for the Christian world, which boasts of its one wife to one man, to produce a polygamy and polyandry side by side in its midst like the lion and the lamb in Revelation. We've drawing-room editions of everything—we should have had one of the Bible and Shakespeare, only that nobody ever reads them,—and so we have drawing-room editions of illicit love, a pretty thing that we can ask to dinner, nod to in church, and meet at court balls. Dear me! poor Messalina was a *very* primitive creature, and must have had a sort of conscience in her after all. We've none."

As the carriage passed onward, and went under the clipped ilex trees of the Villa Medici in the rosy light of the passing day, under the trees they saw the Lady Joan and Ioris.

Lady Joan kissed her hand with a bright and cordial smile.

Ioris, as he bowed, coloured and then grew very pale.

Lady Cardiff smiled as she said: "Are they going up? They'll join the Desarts, I dare say; quite seasonable. The Duchess and the Gregarine are a flight above her; even little Eyebright, I think, don't favour her much. Little Eyebright's no fool, though she does lose her pin-money for a year in five

seconds at Draw-Poker. What a charming game, and what a charming name—Draw-Poker! It is such an epitome of our times, isn't it? All the cards 'chucked,' and the game to the one that 'grabs' quickest. When the world had good manners it played *Ecarté* and *Piquet*; now it has no manners at all, it plays *Poker*. It's curious that we should have no manners, but it is true. Heavens! to think of the old *grandes dames* I remember in my babyhood—friends of the *Lamballe* and the *Polignac*, sitters to *Lawrence* and poems for *Praed*! Where has it all gone—the serene grace, the grand courtesy, the perfect delicacy of sentiment and of phrase, the true consciousness of *noblesse oblige*? It has gone like the old sweet fragrant scent of the dried rose-leaves in the rooms. Nobody has dried rose-leaves now. They have *brûle-parfums* instead, and the perfumes are as loud as their dress and their speech."

Lady Cardiff sighed as she drew up the carriage-skin closer.

"I took a pretty woman yesterday (a great lady, too, as place goes) to see *Vassiltchikoff's* new house. The house is lovely, and has worlds of pretty things; he's a great collector. '*Comme vous êtes bien installé ici*,' she said to him. '*Il faut que j'y pince quelque chose*,' and she carried off one of his best bits of *Saxe*, and an enamelled sweetmeat box of *Petitôt's*. And she'd only seen him twice before.

"*Pince!*" The language of the gutter, and with the language the manners, and with the manners the morals: of course!—inevitable and perpetual conjunction.

"But, my dear, the supreme feminine passion of the day is the bourgeois passion of thrift! In face of all our lawless expenditure and idiotic profusion! Yes. In face of all that. Perhaps because of all that. Women seldom spend their own money. Ask *Dauntless*, *Ioris*, *Buonretiro*, or *Hélène Gregarine's* Grand Dukes. It is expensive work to be *Madame's* 'friend' nowadays. Thrift is the fashionable woman's master-motive—it's only a means to an end; she gets that she may squander. She is the miser and the heir in one person. She seldom wears a dress three times, it's true, and never heeds the loss of one; but that is a matter of vanity and rivalry. To make up for it, she insures her chemises, underpays her governesses, sells her wardrobe when she has to go into mourning, borrows from her friends, and plunders from her lovers. In all her romances she keeps a weather eye open to what will pay; and when she is insisting on a separation, never adores *Don Juan* so much but what she keeps hold of her money if she can. That most poetic and transparent soul, *Princess Milianoff*, wore mourning here all carnival, because her lover was sent out of the country; ruined her family by her headstrong passion; told *Milianoff* flat

to his face that she loathed him and everything belonging to him, and adored Stornellino, and meant to live with him at all costs; but all the same she stipulated that she should have all the Milianoff's jewels, and even asked for the twelve footmen's liveries, and all their silk stockings. Impossible, you say? No; a fact, my dear. A plain, hard, absolute fact. The lawyers heard her. People who say 'Impossible' don't know our world; that's all. She was mad about Stornellino, but all the same she thought she might as well plunder while she could from her husband. The women of our day don't perceive when they drop to bathos. They make absurd anti-climaxes, and never see the ridicule of them. Madame Milianoff was superb in her wrath and her beauty, deaf to her sister's prayers, blind to her father's tears, adamant to her husband's upbraiding, declaring by all the powers that were that she loathed even her child because her child was also his. It was a scene of Medea, of Phèdre, of Lucrezia—but all the same she fought for every one of her diamonds, and remembered the footmen's silk stockings. Now, if there were a living Beaumarchais to put that on the stage, who'd believe it? And yet it is a fact, I tell you. A fact as hard as a pebble. All thrift, my dear; all thrift. That is why there is no passion in our day. They have sensual fancies like rockets, that make a great rush and blaze for a second, but they are always fastened to a gold stick of solid bullion, and when the rocket evaporates in the air, the stick comes down to the ground,—and they keep it. When the woman of our day publishes her '*Souvenirs de mes Tendresses*,' she need only edit her banker's book—with a key and an explanatory note or two. '*A la place du cœur elle n'a qu'une lettre de change.*' If the quotation is not textually correct, it ought to be; it would have been if Hugo had known as much of our world as he does of little Jeanne. By the way, Joan Challoner will get that royal subsidy, they say, out of the ministers for her Messina Bridge, to prop it up a little while. I dare say that's why she looks so smiling to-day.

"Ah! all her efforts seem very puny and petty to you, no doubt; but, in point of fact, those efforts mean very much. They mean perpetual humiliation, constant self-restraint, continual strain, incessant vigilance. Only fancy what it must be to that fiery-hearted violent creature to choke down her temper, to control her scorn, to hide her passion, to veil her disdain; perpetually to stoop and eat dust in the sight of everybody, and bring her tameless tongue to utter all the humble pie of commonplace and compliment! What a purgatory it must be, you say? N—no; hardly that. A continual effort certainly, but she is sustained in it by her anxiety to succeed; and, after all, very likely she feels the fun of the whole thing, and grins all day behind her mask.

"It is nothing new, all this; though you fume about it now, as Alceste fumed and fretted in his time. Society always had its fixed demands. It used to exact birth. It used to exact manners. In a remote and golden age there is a tradition that it was once contented with mind. Nowadays it exacts money, or rather amusement, because if you don't let other folks have the benefit of your money, Society will take no account of it. But have money and spend it well (that is, let Society live on it, gorge with it, walk ankle deep in it), and you may be anything and do anything; you may have been an omnibus conductor in the Strand, and you may marry a duke's daughter. You may have been an oyster girl in New York, and you may entertain royalties. It is impossible to exaggerate an age of anomaly and hyperbole. There never was an age when people were so voracious of amusement, and so tired of it, both in one. It is a perpetual carnival and a permanent yawn. If you can do anything to amuse us you are safe—till we get used to you—and then you amuse us no longer, and must go to the wall. Every age has its price: what Walpole said of men must be true of mankind. Anybody can buy the present age that will bid very high and pay with tact as well as bullion. There is nothing it will not pardon if it see its way to getting a new sensation out of its leniency. Perhaps no one ought to complain. A society with an india-rubber conscience, no memory, and an absolute indifference to eating its own words and making itself ridiculous, is, after all, a convenient one to live in—if you can pay for its suffrages. Panshanger Pomfret married out of his own rank the other day. We were horrified. We were outraged. We had no words to express our sense of the infamy that gave a great man and seventy-five thousand a year to a woman whom nobody knew. We found out all about her in a month, that she had been on the boards of fifth-rate theatres, that she had sung in music halls and danced in tights, that she had been to chimney-sweeps' balls, that she had cooked sausages and sold gin-sling; that she had hired a fictitious mother out from an unmentionable place in New York; in short, that there was nothing that she hadn't done, and we ran a neck-and-neck race as to who should know the last newest and vilest story about her. Well, Pan Pomfret took the bull by the horns, and gilded the horns. (They seldom prick *then*, my dear.) London, and Paris, and Italy were dazzled by his wealth and summoned to his entertainments. He got his cousin to present her at Court, and his sister to receive her; and down the throat of the rest of the world forced her like a very big golden pill. *Il connaît son monde*, my dear. *Luxe* in London, *luxe* in Paris; *luxe* in Rome; and Society bidden to enjoy it; and above all, *luxe* with tact like minever on white satin. Nothing resists the two—

nothing. They make a sovereign's robes, in which a beggar will look regal. It is only a year since he married her, but there is nothing on earth more successful than Panshanger Pomfret's wife. Sung in music halls! Danced in tights! Heavens! my dear, we would all swear till we were black in the face that the public never saw so much even as the very tip of her nose. She did sing in private concerts, in Park Lane and Portman Square, and, we think, *once* at Buckingham Palace. But anything else, my dear! anything else! why, we never heard of such slander—never! We see, hear, and feel her only through a golden shower, as Danaë saw, heard, and felt Jupiter; and what a difference it makes in our sentiments! Mr. Challoner's wife can't be Panshanger Pomfret's, but in her little way she goes on the same principle. The Pomfrets go in for treble events at four figures, and the Challoners for selling-races and shilling sweepstakes, but the principle is the same; the only principle, indeed, that will ever succeed nowadays."

"Believe me, Society is a plant that must be fed and watered, and dug and matted scrupulously," continued Lady Cardiff gravely, as they rolled homeward through the sunset lightened streets. "If you do not take endless trouble with it, it will never blossom for you. Are there not dukes and duchesses nearly as obscure as Jones and Brown? Are there not millionaires, ay billionaires for that matter, who live hidden under their gold as utterly as if it were a dust heap? Why do you see a marchioness a nonentity whose name is barely known off her estates, and a new comer, who has nothing but her shrewd sense and her pleasant manner, pushed up into a leader of fashion? It's all a matter of trouble and tact, my dear; nothing more. It isn't what you have, but how you spend it. It isn't what you are, but what you appear to be. It isn't rank, or brains, or riches, or conduct; you have any one of them, or you may have them all, and yet may avail you nothing. You may remain obscure. Look at Lady Kencarrow in London now—not pretty, not clever, not witty, a third-rate actress in the country, as anybody knows, and yet what a success! Princes of the blood go to dine with her, her house is the very temple of distinction. All a matter of tact, my dear, and of attention. She has devoted her life to getting a Position. She has succeeded. Nothing succeeds like success. You people who are very clever, or very proud, or very careless never—pardon me—succeed with Society. You make a stir in it, perhaps, but that never lasts long: you won't take the pains to please it; and it soon leaves you for people who do. A witty thing comes into your head, and you say it, careless whom it may hit. You are bored by the vanity of other folks, and you show it, indifferent where you may offend. You won't conciliate big little people, and they in their spite set the big big

people against you. So the snowball grows, and one day it gets large enough and hard enough to knock you out of Society altogether. People must make themselves agreeable to be agreeable to the world; yes, and eat a good deal of dust, too; that I concede. If they are very high and mighty by birth and all the rest of it, of course they can be as disagreeable as they choose, and make others eat the dust always. But if not, there is nothing for it but to toady. Believe me, nothing but to toady. Dear Lady Joan knows it. In her little way she succeeds thoroughly. It's a very little way, I grant: to be visited like other people, and go to bankers' balls and clergymen's tea-fights, and stand well in ordinary society generally. That's her ambition! But see how she attains to what she wants—just by smiling on women she hates, and making believe that a two-penny-halfpenny chaplain can send her to heaven on earth! Oh, it all seems unutterably small to you. I know that," she said, with some impatience, as Etoile irreverently laughed. "You clever poetic people have a sort of world of your own, a rock amongst the waves, like Chateaubriand's Tomb. But, after all, my dear creature, Society is not to be despised. It is *pleasant*. Pleasantness is the soft note of this generation, just as scientific assassination is the harsh note of it. The age is compounded of the two. Half of it is chloroform; the other half is dynamite. We are not brilliant, nor powerful, nor original; we shall never sparkle like the *beau siècle*, nor leave heirs to immortality like the Cinque Cento, nor shape the world anew like the early Christians, nor radiate with crystal clearness like the days of Pericles. But when we are not murderous, we are pleasant, pre-eminently pleasant; we know how to gild things, we know how to gloss them, we know how to set chairs on wheels, and put spring cushions in them: we are the Age of Anæsthetics. We have invented painless dentistry and patent bedsteads, we have discovered chloral and condonation, and though we have, to be sure, to bear uncomfortable things like the telephone, the Commune, and Wagner, still we snooze ourselves asleep, and decide that since we must all die so soon we will be as comfortable as we can whilst we are living. It is the doctrine of Horace, with the poetry left out. We are like Tennyson's 'Lotus-eaters':—'Let us alone, what is there worth a row?' (Isn't that the line?) Now, you see, you people who will live on that rock in the midst of the sea, and fly across to us like eagles, only disturb us. That is the truth. You make us think, and Society dislikes thinking. You call things by their right names, and Society hates that, though Queen Bess didn't mind it. You trumpet our own littleness in our ear, and we know it so well that we do not care to hear much about it. You shudder at sin, and we have all agreed that there is no such thing as sin, only mere differences of opinion,

which, provided they don't offend us, we have no business with : adultery is a liaison, lying is gossip, debt is a momentary embarrassment, immorality is a little slip, and so forth ; and when we have arranged this pretty little dictionary of convenient pseudonyms, it is not agreeable to have it sent flying by fierce, dreadful old words, that are only fit for some book that nobody ever reads, like Milton or the Family Bible. We do not want to think. We do not want to hear. We do not care about anything. Only give us a good dinner and plenty of money, and let us outshine our neighbours. There is the Nineteenth Century Gospel. My dear, if Ecclesiasticus himself came over from that rock of yours, he would preach in vain. You cannot convince people that don't want to be convinced. We call ourselves Christians—Heaven save the mark!—but we are only the very lowest kind of pagans. We do not believe in anything—except that nothing matters. Well, perhaps nothing does matter. Only one wonders why ever so many of us were all created, only just to find *that* out."

And Lady Cardiff, who sat and watched the world and her generation with the same contemptuous yet good-humoured amusement that she watched children plunder a Christmas tree, or maidens romp in a cotillon, drew a long breath as she ended her harangue, lighted a fresh cigarette as she rolled home in the dusk, and sighed for the days of Louis Quatorze.

"Why don't you talk, Io?" the Lady Joan was saying meanwhile, walking on under the trees past the kiosque.

"*Mais, ma chère!*—there is such a noise from all those carriages."

"Stuff! There's no more noise than any other day. Did you see Etoile?"

"I saw her."

"With Lady Cardiff. Horrid woman, Lady Cardiff. I can't think what you like in her, she is as insolent as ever she can be. I quite believe that story that Lord Cardiff left her because she horsewhipped him for driving another woman down to Richmond——"

"*Ca ce peut,*" said Ioris with a little shrug of his shoulders.

"Unless it were *worse*," said Lady Joan. "Many people say it *was* worse. I do believe she's said something to the Monmouthshires, for they have refused my dinner. After my giving 'em all those things too; and I wanted 'em to meet the Norwiches and the Fingals, because Fingal's out of temper about that Tabernacle of Mimos. Somebody's been nasty and told him it is all modern bits glued together."

"But of course!" said Ioris with a certain contempt, as of one whose advice had been disregarded and was now proved right.

"Oh, of course! you're always so wise!" said his friend with much irritation. "Of course, when he'd had the money in advance and there wasn't a tabernacle to be found, nobody could do otherwise, and Fingal was delighted with the thing, delighted, until some busybody went and put him out of conceit of it; Mimo has most excellent taste, nobody better."

"Lord Fingal has better," said Ioris coldly; "the Tabernacle will blemish his chapel."

"You've never seen his chapel, and never will, unless I take you to have your soul converted to the true faith, as the Moira old fudges wanted me to do—do you remember? If you didn't like Mimo's tabernacle, why didn't you let us sell the one out of Fiordelisa? *That's* genuine!"

"*Ma chère*," said Ioris blandly. "You know well that there is nothing I ever refuse you. All I reserve to myself is the altar my fathers knelt at. It is foolish, no doubt, but is a foolishness I cannot give up——"

"Oh no, you can be a mule when you like," muttered Lady Joan, who had found him on matters that touched his ancestral creed immovable even under her menaces. Ioris was a man who clung to ancient faiths and ancient ways; he did not believe in them very devoutly indeed, because he was a man of the world and of his time; but he would not have them disturbed. Spoil or embellish, ruin or restore, the rest of Fiordelisa as she might, he had will enough of his own to bar her progress at the chapel door. The Lady Joan, who looked longingly at its Della Robbias, its Cellini candlesticks, its old oak screen, its old marble altar, and its chased silver chalices, felt herself defrauded of her rights. "All these things growing mouldy for a set of peasants!" she would mutter, and in her mind's eye see them fittingly moved away to South Kensington, and did not despair even yet of one day so moving them.

At that moment Mr. Silverly Bell joined them in their walk. "My dear St. Paul!" cried Lady Joan, enchanted: his baptismal name was Paul.

Mr. Silverly Bell was flattered and smiled. He had a soft sweet smile—never softer, never sweeter, than when he was carrying little drops of poison about in little sweetmeats of pretty phrases: that was his occupation. No one could say Mr. Silverly Bell was otherwise than good-natured; he never said an ill-natured thing; he only "regretted," only "wished," only "feared." When a person's character was so bad that as a saviour of society he was obliged to drown it in the tea-pot, he always sighed as he did so, tenderly, and wore a quite crushed air, as of extreme pain.

Lady Joan was very fond of him; she had not known him very long, indeed, but at a glance she had discovered the extreme

usefulness of him—smile, sigh, and all. He had started with a prejudice against her, but he had been vanquished; she welcomed him so delightedly, invited him so persistently, praised him so ardently, that he could not but yield; and with this handsome woman on his arm at the spinsters' teas and the clergymen's gatherings, could not but feel meekly flattered. In return, he placed himself—smile, sigh, and all—at her disposal, and was of great value.

"Silverly Bell assures me there's nothing in it—nothing in it. He must know; he's always in her house," said Mrs. Grundy time and again, when having received a momentary scare from the sight of Lady Joan rattling out at the gates with a gun between her knees, and the handsome profile of Ioris dark against the sun beside her, Mr. Silverly Bell reassured her seriously, and smoothed down her ruffled scruples with a few judicious words.

"What do I care for the old cats?" she would say with a grin, twitching Pippo's reins, and flecking her whip over her tossing mane. But she did care, care endlessly, care with all her heart and soul. People who do not care do not say so. The soldier who is not afraid never boasts that he fears no ball.

The lawless gipsy half of her sent her across country with her whip and her cigar, her gun and her lover, rattling through the dust at full gallop, and showing her white teeth at broad jests that she shouted above the din of the wheels. But the coward in her was none the less powerful; and when the ponies were back in the stable, she would shake off the dust and don a full suit of decorum, and bear herself with cheerful countenance, and go through all the million and one ceremonials of commonplace existence with a zeal and a patience that demanded their reward and got it.

A woman who ought to be out of society, but, nevertheless, is always in it, commands the genuine respect of both sexes. She pleases them too; for she neither offends the stronger sex by too much virtue, nor offends the weaker sex by too much effrontery. Lady Joan lunching meekly off cold lamb and lettuce with a clergyman's wife on a Sunday morning, and Lady Joan going joyously to champagne and caviare at the masquerade on a Sunday night, was an instance of that adaptability to circumstances which is the most popular of all qualities.

Mr. Silverly Bell, and such as he, enabled her to go at once to the lamb and lettuce, and to the champagne and caviare. She knew this, and petted Mr. Silverly Bell and his type accordingly.

It may be opposed to all the graceful theories on the relations of the sexes, but it is true that the woman who seeks the admiration of the majority, and shows that it is agreeable to her, will

almost always secure it. She will turn against her the highest order of men indeed, but as this is a very small minority the loss will not be felt. In society, as in politics, the majority is the least intelligent but the most imposing section.

Happily for herself, she was so constituted that she could enjoy netting a minnow as much as landing a sturgeon, and brought to her efforts at capture an infinite zest that was of itself assurance of success. She took so much trouble, she was so charmed with commonplaces, her smile beamed so radiantly, her hand pressed theirs so cordially, her manner was so accentuated with the strongest welcome and the most eager enjoyment of their companionship, that a man could hardly be otherwise than gratified with his own effect on her; and when he left her presence, could not do less than defend the good manners and good taste of a lady so favourable to himself.

The art of pleasing is more based on the art of seeming pleased than people think of, and she disarmed the prejudices of her enemies by the unaffected delight she appeared to take in themselves. You may think very ill of a woman, but after all you cannot speak very ill of her if she has assured you a hundred times that you are amongst her dearest friends.

And if a very fastidious mind is displeased with flattery, very fastidious minds are not general, and a taste for flattery is. "Be honey, and the flies will eat you," says the old saw; but, like most other proverbs, it will not admit of universal application. There is a way of being honey that is thoroughly successful and extremely popular, and constitutes a kind of armour that is bomb-proof.

"Michael Angelo was a fool," said Mr. Pratt, an English sculptor, who lived with Roman princes, and was called Pheidias Pratt by artists in general, and took the derision seriously as a compliment—to Pheidias—and would demonstrate to you that the Apollo of the Belvedere was nothing so very extraordinary after all.

"A sublime fool, but a fool!" said Pheidias Pratt, shifting his scarlet fez on one side. "Did all his work himself; only think of the waste of power! Half his years spent in chipping; lost in mere stonemason's labour. Now, I keep sixty workmen; I never touch the marble—never touch it!—and look what numbers of statues I can turn out in the year."

"And the ideas, Mr. Pratt?" said Etoile. "Do you hire them also, or do you do without them?"

"The ideas! the ideas!" echoed Pheidias with a stare; and the good fellow walked off huffed in his velvet gown, amongst his marble children, who all gazed vacuously into space with scarcely more soul in any one of them than in the carved doll of a Swabian toy-maker.

He had married, twenty years before, twenty thousand a year, in the person of an alderman's heiress, and his works were to be seen in law courts and public halls, gentlemen's mansions and people's parks. What did he want with ideas? Nevertheless, he felt the allusion to such a thing was in very bad taste.

The Lady Joan, who had brought Etoile to the studio, grinned as she herself fell into ecstasies over a Desolation, the embroideries of whose tunic she declared she felt she must pick off with a pair of scissors: the marble was so exactly like thread.

"How could you inquire for such 'outsiders' as ideas?" she murmured to Etoile. "Of course he hires his ideas; clever young Italians sell heaps of ideas for a hundred francs. All that's dear old Phid's own in his sculptures is his name on the pedestals."

"Poor Michael Angelo!"

The Lady Joan laughed.

"Well, I don't think you need put yourself out for him; he's pretty safe, and I don't think Phid here will go down to posterity with him. But Phid will hate you, you know, for ever. Why don't you tell him that Venus at the Bath is beautiful?"

"A bathing woman, that must have been modelled at Trouville? With a hip out of joint, too, look!"

"Phid gives capital parties, and he's 'coining' every day," said Lady Joan, dryly. "And his wife has the longest and the nastiest tongue in Europe."

And she swam after the sulking Phidias and told him that his Sabrina was the noblest work of the century; Sabrina was robed from head to foot; Mr. Pheidias Pratt thought the nude barbarous; he held, too, that it was very easy—only study anatomy, and there you were.

"A very intelligent woman, that wife of Challoner's," said the good Pheidias to his own wife, a few hours later. "If I were you I'd call on her; it isn't worth while to be too starchy: of course she larks about with Ioris, and all that kind of thing; but it's no business of ours if the husband like it; and she tells me Lord Hebrides is her cousin. The Hebrides are here this winter. I'd leave a bit of pasteboard if I were you."

His wife, who hitherto had always insisted that the Casa Challoner was too flagrant to be entered, because she herself came from Clapham, and had severe notions, allowed herself to be persuaded against her conscience, and left the bit of pasteboard, and a few days later a larger piece inscribed, "Mrs. Pratt. At Home. Tuesdays"—with a very small "music" hiding itself in the corner.

Lady Joan gave a grimace of triumph before the big card.

Mrs. Pratt's musical Tuesdays were amongst the choicest gatherings of the season; all the embassies went there, and hitherto Lady Joan had languished in vain for an entrance.

Of course a similar big card was delivered at the house of Ioris. Society, provided only you will wash your cup and platter, will always oblige you in these little things.

Mrs. Pratt had been six years bringing her Clapham conscience into recognition of the Casa Challoner; but having brought her conscience round, she at last brought it round with a handsome sweep, and knew the polite ways of society too much not to follow them, and sent the big card to Ioris, so that he might enter her presence with the Lady Joan, and be at hand for the Lady Joan's fan on the Lady Joan's wish to walk about the rooms, or the Lady Joan's carriage when the party was over. Mrs. Phaidias Pratt knew that as a leader of society she must be amiable in such matters.

So did Lady Joan gain her point, by merely pretending to want her scissors to pick off the embroideries of a marble Desolation, and by saying a Sabrina surpassed Praxiteles and Donatello.

Who should say she was not a cleverer woman than Etoile?

Certainly Mrs. Pratt left cards little and big on Etoile, as she would have done on Phryne or Mephistopheles, had she met either of them at Princess Vera's; but Mr. Pratt said to his wife that he was sure there would be something queer about her somewhere which would come out some day, and Mrs. Pratt pursed her mouth to her friend: "Y—e—es. We do receive her. We met her at Princess Vera's. But, *who was she?* That is what I never can learn."

"*Who was she?*" said Mrs. Pratt with sepulchral whisper and solemn stare, and had a way of saying it, and of vaguely implying a great deal by the way she said it, for which Lady Joan could have kissed her, "detestable old woman," with her dukes and duchesses, and rubbish, though the Lady Joan had always considered her to be. For the Lady Joan did not permit other people to air dukes and duchesses; as for herself, dukes and duchesses were all her cousins, and came in handy when she wanted to impress the small fry of society; that was different: when you are born a Perth-Douglas, and want to sell a teacup or a triptych, you must employ the advantages that Nature has given you.

But she was very often so out of temper with herself that neither dukes nor duchesses, teacups or triptychs could reconcile her to life. She knew very well that when she had been presented at seventeen, handsome, black-browed, and Spanish looking, there had been no reason in life why she should not have become an English duchess in her own person. By temper she

was ambitious, by nature she longed for place and power ; she knew very well that her life was a *coup manqué* ; and now and then some irritated pride at the smallness of her aims, and the pigmy proportions of her results, would wake in her, and make her acrid and disappointed and enraged with her past and her present. There were times when she realised that her life was, after all, obscure and little and ignoble.

Sometimes it made her in such a rage with herself that she shook her fist at the image of her black brows in her mirror. For she was shrewd enough, and—in her own odd way—proud enough, to hate herself heartily at times for all the dust she ate, and all the honey she prepared for the eating of Society. And still more she hated those who had sight enough to see the dust on her mouth, and the honey in her hands, and amongst them she instinctively numbered Etoile.

She began to detest Etoile with that vehement and concentrated dislike which is only the stronger because it cannot explain itself, or put any clear name to its origin.

Something in the glance of Etoile stung her conscience ; something in her smile made her pride wince ; she was always fancying that Etoile was thinking of all Voightel had told her of those days when the champagne had been in the ice-pails on the housetops in Damascus : Voightel had told her nothing, but the Lady Joan would never have credited that. Somehow, too, before Etoile's life—meditative, poetic, studious, always aloof from the world even when in the world—her own life seemed common and bustling, and base and ridiculous. At the bottom of her soul lay a contempt for herself, a bitter and restless contempt : it stirred in her, and stung her in this stranger's presence—and she hated her.

CHAPTER XV.

"Why don't people like Etoile?" said Lady Cardiff.

"Don't they like her?" said a Russian Baroness. "I do."

"You do, my dear, I do, a hundred clever people do, but not the majority!"

"I will tell you why," said Princess Vera, who was in her own house, and to whom these ladies had come as an amateur-deputation about a great charity ball at the Capitol.

"Yes, well?" said Lady Cardiff, in expectation of a titbit of news.

"She likes to see the sun rise," said Princess Vera.

"What? The sun rise in winter!"

"In winter and summer. Unnatural, isn't it?" said Princess Vera, lifting her lovely head from an old miniature she was copying. "It is those unnatural tastes that we find unpleasant. The traditional lady who answered naively that she did not care for innocent pleasures was the one candid person of all womanhood, depend on it, and represented a sentiment more general than we like to acknowledge. A woman who does like innocent pleasures is to us just what a writer who won't take money for his books, or a painter who won't sell his pictures, is to all other writers and all other painters. Nothing is so objectionable in anybody as to be above everybody else's tastes and necessities. When we come from our balls feeling ugly and untidy, and *ennuyées*, and see her just coming out of the door beginning the day, we feel to dislike her. It is all the sunrise. Nothing else."

People laughed. Princess Vera, who was always lovely, and never *ennuyée*, and cared for sunrises herself, could afford to say such things.

Mrs. Henry V. Clams, who was present, felt angry, though she never dared to open her lips before Princess Vera.

"Of course one aren't as neat and spry comin' out as goin' in, and after the cotillon how should we be? but there's no call for her to say so," she thought, feeling personally aggrieved and wondering if Princess Vera had seen her curl drop off into the soup, as it had done at the Japanese Embassy supper on the previous night.

Princess Vera was quite right: Society was naturally suspicious of such a queer taste for sunrises.

Society could never understand it. Why should anybody who wasn't *obliged*, go out early? All the pretty fashionable women who waltzed themselves half out of their sleeveless boddices till

sunrise dawned on them drinking hot soup and champagne, and then slept serenely with chloral's benign aid till it was time to have their complexions "done up," never could understand or forgive a woman who walked, drove, or rode in solitude while the dew was still fresh.

For some years the world that talked about her had thought Etoile went out for mysterious intrigues, which intention would have redeemed the unnatural action and made it more natural; but being at length after several seasons compelled to conclude that this explanation was impossible, the eccentricity of the habit could be only annoying.

That she went for mere air, mere exercise, and the charm that lies in the freshness and silence of the early day, was a thing far too simple to be grasped by the astute intelligence of an experienced Society.

The simplicity of the artist is always the stumbling-block of the artist with the world.

One early morning, following this habit, she was wandering alone with her dog under the woods of the Pamphili Doria, where she had especial permission to drive at her pleasure. In the breezy uplands of that lovely place she rambled ankle-deep in violets, lost in thought, the dreamy scholarly fanciful thought which Rome begets in any contemplative mind; suddenly her thoughts were scattered by the excitement and apparent sorrow of Tsar, who ran to and fro, whining and pawing at some object on the grass under the oak trees. On going nearer to the dog, she found outstretched there a woman who had fainted, and was lying insensible.

She was young and handsome, though her face had the gaunt grey leanness of long hunger, and her bones seemed almost starting through the skin. When the woman came to herself, she moaned for her child, refusing to be comforted, and begging to be taken home. "Home" was a miserable garret, in a dark and loathsome lane of crowded hovels.

Etoile had her taken there, and followed her.

In the garret was a baby of two years old; he was rosy and well; the mother had starved herself to give him the little food she could get. By little and little she told her story, a very trite one: she was an Hungarian, a ballet dancer, engaged at fifteen years old to follow a wandering Viennese troop, and, falling ill, left behind them unpaid; for the enterprise had not succeeded. In her poverty and beauty a young French painter had found her and loved her: she had been happy for six months. Then her lover had deserted her, gone to his own country, promising to return; he had written once or twice, but never now for two years. She had no relatives and no friends. Dance any more she could not, for her ankle had been broken in a stage

trap, and though well again, had been ill set and was stiff. Friendless, sick, and wretched, she had dropped from one depth to another depth, lower and lower, but keeping herself honest that the boy might not blush for her in his manhood.

She had gone into the Pamphili woods to gather violets to sell, and had fainted as she had stooped to the first flower. It was one of those short sad stories which lie thick and common as dust under the roofs of great cities. Death comes and brushes such dust away; and it gathers again by the morrow.

Etoile, returning to see her later in the day, and welcomed in the wretched attic with touching gratitude, found that the poor creature's one desire was to get some means of maintenance for herself and the child in Rome. She could not bear to leave the place where her love's short joys had been known, and where her lover, she always hoped, might one day or other return.

She did not know what to do, but was willing to do anything "that would not make the child ashamed." The sculptors would have paid her to let them model her form, which was symmetrically beautiful; but better death, even for the boy, than that, she thought. She clung with absolute fidelity to her lover's memory.

The hive of wretched houses in which she dwelt was in the heart of Rome, and almost touched the back of the Casa Challoner. When with an aching heart she left the garret, the little child stretching his arms out after her, and the mother blessing her and her dog too for rescue from the grave, it was twilight in the short wintry day, and the lamp, lighted before the doorway of the Temple of all the Virtues, caught her sight as it glanced through the gloom.

"Perhaps she could help me to help her," thought Etoile. She vaguely doubted in all things the woman who Voightel had said would be to her the Prose of Rome, yet the energy and promptitude of a character utterly opposite to her own as vaguely impressed her by its very unlikeness to herself. The Hungarian girl, in her wretchedness, was only divided by a few yards from the cosy mirthful chambers of the Casa Challoner. To speak of her might perhaps secure her a friend there.

It was a Wednesday, and several of the heavy landaus that yearly bear to and fro their freight of rich foreign visitors about the streets of Rome were standing before the house. Etoile descended from her own carriage, and remembered that she ought weeks before to have attended one of these solemn rites.

The house looked curiously changed. It made her think of Sganarelle drawing a long face to feel the patient's pulse.

There was no scent in the Turkish room save from a fountain of eau de Cologne; there was a tea-urn in the Turkish room solemn as a high altar; there were crowds entirely composed of

ladies, and serried ranks of dowagers and spinsters bolt upright on the Turkish divans. There was a murmur of small talk like the unending murmur of the sea; the Bishop of Melita and a Dean of St. Edmund's conversed together in the centre of the chamber; Mr. Challoner had become "dear Robert," and was handing bread and butter; and amidst it all stood the Lady Joan with a little ruff round her throat, and a grey gown, who was asking after a baby's health with eager solicitude, and standing with her little girl's curls pressed tenderly to her side, herself smiling sweetly in the face of Mrs. Grundy, as typified at that moment by Lady George Scrope-Stair and that very proper little person, Mrs. Macscrip.

Mrs. Grundy was in great force, indeed, in all her types there, and the Lady Joan, with her hand on her child's neck, was saying apologetically—

"Well, you know, I don't like it, and that's the truth. Of course there are unpleasant sort of stories, and Mr. Challoner doesn't approve my being much with her. But, you know, I'm always good-natured, and my father is such a dear blind goose——"

"The Comtesse d'Avesnes!" shouted her servant between the silk curtains of her drawing-room doorway.

The serried battalions of Mrs. Grundy's forces fell asunder with a shock, and some dropped their biscuits, and one even dropped her cup. The Lady Joan, however, who never dropped anything except an inconvenient memory or an unremunerative acquaintance, rushed forward with cordial smile and outstretched hands.

"Too good of you. What a pleasure! You, who despise tea-fights, too! Do come to the fire. Effie, go and fetch the cream!"

Little Effie, bringing the cream, looked softly at Etoile, who had been kind to her, and timidly stroked the silver fox furs of her dress.

"I like you," said the child in a nervous little voice. "Why did mamma say——?"

"Effie, hand the cake to Lady George," said Mr. Challoner, who was standing on guard by the hearthrug, having just safely left the Bishop and the Dean cordially discussing the state of the Colonial Church. The child, frightened, slid timidly away, and it never occurred to Etoile that the words which she had partially overheard on her entrance could by any chance whatever have referred to herself.

The serried ranks of Mrs. Grundy drew away from the fire, and, as around a safe and holy sanctuary, closed round the tea-table where the Scrope-Stair sisters, in bonnetless intimacy, were presiding over the urn.

"Dear Lady Joan is too good-natured," sighed Mrs. Grundy, *sotto voce*, and the Scrope-Stair sisters murmured back—

"Oh yes, you know; it is her independence and nobleness. She never *will* believe in the possibility of evil."

Mrs. Grundy shook her head, and glancing towards the fire wondered what the cost of the silver fox furs had been. Why could questionable characters always dress so well? Mrs. Grundy does not always dress well.

Lady Cardiff nodded from her corner by the hearth, where she had ensconced herself with her eye-glass, and motioned Etoile to a seat beside her.

"How do, my dear Comtesse? Cold day, isn't it? What a charming gown. And those *niello* buttons too—delicious! It's quite amusing here; only one's always afraid she'll come out with something for one to buy. If it wasn't for that apprehension it would really be delicious to see her butter all those bores and do the proper for Mrs. Grundy. I've said I'd the toothache, and kept quiet just to watch her. It's great fun. How does she square it with all her little games! But the little games are only the boldness of innocence. So Mimo says. He must know."

Lady Cardiff put up her eye-glass to look at Mrs. Henry V. Clams' Bretonne toilette (the entire costume of a fisher girl, correctly copied, in *feuille-morte* velvet, and navy blue satin, with a merveilleuse bonnet to crown it appropriately), and Lady Cardiff said aloud for the benefit of neighbours that His Holiness was very ill, the old trouble in the legs, and then, sinking her voice, continued:—

"In Spain, you know, my dear, when a lovely woman has had an adventure, her friends say she has eaten a lily. That's just what her friends say. She munches her leeks, and they swear they're lilies. Happy creature! All comes of a wooden husband, as I told you the other day, and her admirable faculty of boring herself to death. She will hear me? Nonsense; she is screaming into Lady George Scrope's ear-trumpet. If she did hear, she'd only ask me to dinner and sell me a *magot*. That's her way of revenging herself. She's been dying to be acquainted with the Monmouthshires for four winters, but they never would let her be introduced to them. (You know whom I mean—the Monmouthshires—she's the Duke of Brecon's sister). Well, when I was with them one day last week, in comes my Lady Joan, bold as brass, and with her pockets full of all the sweepings of her *bric-à-brac* shops, and rosaries of olives that she gathered herself upon Olivet—all these as offerings to Anne Monmouthshire, who is perfectly mad on the subject of a lottery for the blind English in Rome. (I believe there are six of them blind, or some such number.) And all these sweepings and olives were for that lottery. The bait took—yes, the bait took. Anne Monmouthshire, who always loathed her, has returned her card, and has certainly invited her to a musical party next week.

Now *you*, instead of doing a thing like that, only find out sick old folks and do good to them, and let nobody be the wiser!"

"There! there!" said Lady Cardiff, vivaciously, interrupting herself as a haughty-looking dowager, with a very aquiline nose, and very fine sables, sailed into the room. "Didn't I tell you so? Just look at her. There's Anne Monmouthshire actually come on her *day*! Watch her now. Watch her! What eagerness, what cordiality, what ecstasy! Dear me, how very funny it is that anybody born a Perth-Douglas should be such a snob. She pined four whole winters to get the Monmouthshires here, and now she's done it, just by those shop-sweepings and olives. Really she ought to have been a greater creature than she is! Oh, I see you despise all these things. You are leagues above such considerations. You are governed by your sympathies and your antipathies. You seek or shun other folks by no better rule than their merit or demerit. What can be more indiscreet? You like people who can be of no manner of service to you, and dislike all sorts of great personages. Pardon me, but that is not how Society is carried on. Society is an aggregate of personal enemies—all women are all women's enemies, and most women are most men's enemies, too, if men did but know it, which they don't; but hostility should never interfere with prudence. A grain of sand may blind a Samson, or a Sappho: that is the figure that should always loom large before any of us. Don't provoke the sand with a whirlwind: take a watering-pot. That is where our admirable Lady Joan is pre-eminent. To look at her she should raise the whirlwind; with an oriental profile and a mastiff's jaw, one would expect a whirlwind from her. Not a bit of it; she has a nice green watering-pot, like a true British horticulturist, and she smooths her sand diligently with a silver shower from the parish pump. The whirlwind does the world good; it clears the mist, it sweeps away the pestilence, it bears the eagles as the sea her ships, and drives the clouds before it. Oh yes, and it's very nice in epic poetry. But the watering-pot is a much meeker domestic servant, and a much more popular instrument. If you would use the watering-pot, my dear, you would never get the dust in your eyes."

Wherewith Lady Cardiff rose and swam away majestically to her friend Anne Monmouthshire, and said very cruelly—

"Didn't know you knew Lady Joan, my love! Delighted to meet you so unexpectedly. Have you come to get any more rosaries? Gathered the olives yourself, dear Lady Joan, didn't you, and on Olivet? Dear me, how charming; just like Noah's dove. Wasn't it Noah's dove?"

Meanwhile Mrs. Henry V. Clams approached Etoile, who always filled her with that uncomfortable sensation which Burns embodies as the idea that "a chiel's amang us takin' notes," and

engaging her timidly in conversation, invited her to dinner—a very great dinner to be given in twelve days from that time.

Etoile declined on the plea that she had come for health, and went out very little. Mrs. Henry V. Clams suddenly felt that the Bretonne costume was loud, and the *merveilleuse bonnet* incongruous. “She’s real nasty,” thought that good-natured lady.

At that moment there entered a person very unlike the Bishop of Melita and the Dean of St. Edmund’s—a graceful and distinguished-looking person, with a charming smile and a perfect bow.

Lady Cardiff put up her eyeglass.

“Dear me! There’s Ioris!” she said to her friend, Anne Monmouthshire, whom she had cruelly possessed herself of, and drawn away near the door. “Dear me! Husbands usually shirk these ‘days,’ but he and Mr. Challoner are really most exemplary. What do I mean? Oh, I don’t mean anything, of course, my dear. Nice-looking man, isn’t he? Such *race* about him. Somehow he doesn’t go well with the tea-urn, do you think? and the Bishop? You are quite delighted with her? To be sure, why shouldn’t you be? I’m sure she tries hard to please you, and she never did anything in the East, you know, but gather those olives; never anything! Such a pretty idea, too, Olives from Olivet!”

Meanwhile, as Ioris entered, the brow of his hostess grew black as night. “You’re an hour too early; how could you be such a fool?” she muttered roughly. “You ought always to let ’em all be gone; I’ve told you so fifty hundred times.”

He murmured penitent apologies, greeted the saints around the tea-urn gaily and gracefully, and crossed to the sinner in the silver furs. “I saw your liveries at the door, so I ventured to enter,” he murmured to Etoile; Mr. Challoner shifted his eyeglass with a grim smile, and, vacating his post by the fire, asked Mrs. Grundy if the Chemnitz scandal were not a terrible blow to Society. Mr. Challoner always spoke of Society with peculiar tenderness and respect, as if it were his elder brother.

The Baroness Chemnitz, who had dealt this blow, was a beautiful young Roman, with a head as perfect as a *narcissus*, and a body as graceful as its stem. She had been wedded by a ruined family to a great German capitalist at eighteen. She had decorated his wonderful Louis Quinze houses and Renaissance hotels for some five or six seasons. She had seen all the world dance in her gorgeous rooms until ten in the morning in Paris, Berlin, and Rome. Then a great love had entered into her; a whirlwind of passion that transformed the pale, pensive *narcissus* into a purple *passiflora* with a heart of fire. She fell, but she fell grandly. She erred, but she never swerved from

her punishment. She faced the wrath of her husband, the fury of her family, the rage of the world. She confessed herself guilty, and claimed her separation, and left all the gold and the glories of her place, and went out to face solitude—for her lover even turned against her; lovers like Society dislike a storm, and blame a hesitation to deceive. The husband had to be held back by main force from her destruction; she hurled her hatred of him in his teeth, and shook herself free from the trammels of his riches, and went down into the dust of obscurity. What could an outraged Society do?—such a woman as this was unnatural. To old Greek times perhaps she might belong, but born under the Second Empire of France, surely she should have known some better way than this.

She was in love, of course—women always were—but then to leave such luxury for love!

What depravity! sighed Society. Such a ball as her last was—diamond rings and sapphire lockets given away like pebbles in the cotillon, and twenty thousand francs spent in forced strawberries alone!—how stupid, when, with a little management, nothing need have been known, you know!—her bedroom hung with white satin, embroidered with wreaths of roses; her footmen to be counted by the score; her lovers like the dreams of Aladdin; and, to leave all that, when with a little tact!—was there ever such unheard-of madness?—to make an abominable *éclat*, when with only a grain of sense no one need have suspected anything!—to lose a fortune counted by trillions, because she could not smile in her lord's eyes, and lie a little gracefully, and manage things quite quietly, as good-breeding teaches every one! What insuperable idiocy!—what inconceivable baseness! Did she not know better her mere duty to Society?

What did Society care for the woman's agony, for her long temptation, for her piteous feebleness, for the mute misery with which she had played her part in the gorgeous pageant of her life; for the passionate sickness for one voice, one glance, one touch, which had made her cast away all the pomp and powers of her place, and fling herself into the dust for love alone?

What did they know or care? They only saw a fool who forfeited pride and pleasure and possession; who left wealth and ease and the delights of boundless extravagance behind her as so much dross; who could not lie, who would not be bribed, who would not be content with treachery and vice, but craved for liberty, and stooped to truth! Society was outraged.

If her precedent were followed—what balls would there be to go to? A husband who leapt like a lion to avenge his own dishonour, and a wife who shook off millions like dust from her unfaltering feet! Society was aghast—nothing frightens it like passion. For what does Passion care to amuse Society?

Society with one voice proclaimed Geltrude Chemnitz the vilest of her sex; and, now around the Lady Joan's tea-table, agreed with Mr. Challoner that in these flagrant cases Society could not be too severe. Society, which invited Lady Joan and Ioris to the same entertainments; Society, which smiled and sniggered with vile beneficence on a million illicit unions; Society, which had invented and patronised those blasphemies of "friendship" and fervent parodies of "purity;" Society, which pressed the wife's wedded hand warm from her lover's lips, so long as the husband presided blandly at the desecration of his hearth; Society, which smiled good-humouredly on the "little weaknesses" of post-nuptial loves so long as the supplanted lord had neither modesty enough to feel his shame, nor virility enough to take his vengeance; Society, which crowned the adulteress, and welcomed her, so long as she kept a lie upon her mouth, and had a bold front lifted to the gaze of men; Society, which only when the man was roused as man, and the woman could blush as woman, saw "any harm whatever," and only when the doors were shut, the tables feastless, and the world forgot in woe, found out that sin was after all an ugly thing, and faithless wives were wantons.

"It is such a grievous thing when a woman forgets herself!" said the Lady Joan who had danced at the last monster ball in the Louis Quinze rooms, and ordered Io to bring her her chicken and champagne in tones that a kindly duchess would barely use to a steward's-room boy.

She herself never forgot herself; she only forgot other people—when they were of no use to her—which does not matter at all.

What a fool the beautiful wife of Baron Chemnitz looked to her!—to have only one lover in all your life, and let everybody know it, and leave white satin bedrooms and Louis Quinze dining-rooms, diamonds as big as marbles, and horses from the imperial haras, and all the rest of it, with a horrible rupture and uproar, so that all Europe heard of the crime!

It made Lady Joan quite ferocious to think what chances other women had and what dire mess and misuse they made of them. Only see what *she* did—with little rooms like bandboxes, and no money to speak of, and never a Louis Quinze mirror in the house at all, unless it were bought to be sold on the morrow.

She felt more respect than ever for herself; and felt that there was some use after all events in a Mr. Challoner, just as there is no doubt in sea-anemones and houseflies, and other inferior creations, whose existence a superior humanity is apt thoughtlessly to resent as uselessly and insignificantly superfluous, and occasionally prominently disagreeable.

"My! It's a caution, aren't it?" said Mrs. Henry V. Clams thoughtlessly, biting a piece out of a bit of Madeira cake.

Lady Joan looked severe as Diana Nemorensis. A caution! Who wanted "a caution" in good society? Did not Mrs. Henry V. Clams know that she was eating cake in the Temple of All the Virtues?

"It is disgusting; perfectly disgusting," she said, with severity. And to think we all went to her only last week! Really, it is quite horrible, isn't it? It makes one almost feel ashamed one's self."

"I don't see no call to do that," said Mrs. Henry V. Clams, reddening a little, for she had brought a sort of conscience out of the land of wooden nutmegs, and never could attain the sublime audacity of the Lady Joan's panoply of perfection. "I don't see no call to do that. We aren't no kith or kin to her, poor soul. Oh, my! she'll miss it fine, I reckon—do you mind that *rivière* Chemnitz gave her New Year's Day? Pearls as big as plover's eggs, weren't they now? She must be downright vicious."

"Innate depravity!" said the Lady Joan. "Well, she'll starve now, thank goodness. She hasn't a penny of her own, you know."

And the ladies present, who had all danced and drunk, and borne off the costly cotillon toys from the Chemnitz balls throughout four carnivals, agreed that she ought to starve; all except Mrs. Henry V. Clams, who was too good-natured, and whose conscience was pricking her.

The Prince Ioris turned round in the low chair where he sat by the hearth beside Etoile, and murmured a word in favour of his lovely countrywoman.

"The blame is hardly Geltrude's," he said, gently; "I knew her from her infancy; she was of the sweetest nature; but her people forced her into a marriage that she loathed; she was frank and fearless, and our women are not cold, mesdames; love to them——"

"Hold your tongue, Io! This is not the place to talk in such a way," said Lady Joan sharply, with a heavy frown. "There is no excuse for Madame Chemnitz; not the slightest. She should have done her duty. It was certainly gilded enough to make it easy!"

Ioris was silent, and turning back again to the fire, resumed his conversation with Etoile. When your lady-love arrays herself in ruffs and farthingale of social virtue, there is obviously nothing to do but to be silent. You cannot quarrel with her for having managed so well that, whilst she smiles upon you she yet makes the world smile on her: it would be both impolite and ungrateful.

"I am pained for Chemnitz; very pained; what can riches compensate to a man for dishonour?" said Mr. Challoner, sternly gazing at the teapot. The assembled ladies murmured applause to so beautiful if hackneyed a sentiment.

"Lord! what a liar that man is!" thought Mrs. Henry V. Clams, and went to her carriage to take up Fontebranda at the club.

Fontebranda never asked her to make Mr. Henry V. Clams lie in that manner: Fontebranda only said to her, "Get a great cook; give three big balls a winter, and drive English horses: you need never consider Society then, it will never find fault with you, *ma très-chère*."

She did not quite understand, but she obeyed; and Society never did. Society says to the members of it as the Spanish monk to the tree that he pruned, and that cried out under his hook:—

"It is not beauty that is wanted of you, nor shade, but olives."

Moral loveliness or mental depth, charm of feeling or nobleness of instinct, beauty, or shade, it does not ask for, but it does ask for olives—olives that shall round off its dessert, and flavour its dishes, and tickle its sated palate: olives that it shall pick up without trouble, and never be asked to pay for: these are what it likes.

Now, it is precisely in olives that the woman who has one foot in Society and one foot out of it will be profuse.

She must please, or perish.

She must content, or how will she be countenanced?

The very perilousness of her position renders her solicitous to attract and to appease.

Society follows a natural selfishness in its condonation of her; she is afraid of it, therefore she must bend all her efforts to be agreeable to it; it can reject her at any given moment, so that her court of it must be continual and expansive. No woman will take so much pains, give so much entertainment, be so willing to conciliate, be so lavish in hospitality, be so elastic in willingness, as the woman who adores Society, and knows that any Black Saturday it may turn on her with a bundle of rods, and a peremptory dismissal.

Between her and Society there is a tacit bond.

"Amuse me, and I will receive you."

"Receive me, and I will amuse you."

Meanwhile Lady Joan dismissed, one by one, the whole battalion of Mrs. Grundy's forces, and the lighter squadrons of airy ladies who had carried off the gold toys from the Chemnitz cotillions, and heard the carriages of the deans and the dowagers, and the bankers' wives, and the more modest cabs of the minor acquaintances, roll away towards the Corso in the dusk. The

Scrope-Stairs bonneted and cloaked themselves, and also prepared to depart.

"They are excellent persons," Ioris had said confidentially of them to Etoile, that day in the corner by the fire:—" *Ma! mi seccano!* They are the sort of women we put in convents in our country. It is terrible that the English have nowhere to put their unmarried women, but can only let them overrun other lands, like flocks of goats, stray and unhappy."

"You are very ungrateful; they adore you, all these sisters."

"Oh! *C'est le pire défaut!*" had rejoined Ioris, with his light laugh.

But the Scrope-Stairs sisters, assisting at the tea-table, had heard nothing of this, and little divined what he had been saying as he had sat in the corner by the fire, in the low chair that Lady Cardiff had vacated.

"Io," said Lady Joan, as the sisters embraced her in adieu, and with that glitter of wrath in her eyes which Ioris knew but too well; "the girls can't go by themselves, and I can't spare anybody. See them home, will you? Get back by seven; Ron-soulet will be here, you know, and Victor."

Ioris glanced at Etoile, hesitated, sighed, and offered his escort to the sisters.

"They might go from the Campidoglio to Soracte, no one would stop them," he thought to himself, but courtesy was his nature, and obedience to his tyrant was second nature.

"He'd have gone home with *her* if I hadn't sent him off," thought the Lady Joan, wondering why Etoile still remained in the low chair by the fire.

"I lingered behind your other visitors because I want your advice if you will give it me," said Etoile, as though answering her thoughts, as the door closed upon Ioris, and Mr. Challoner vanished into his own den.

She responded eagerly, all attention in an instant, remembering that Etoile had bought a good deal of brocade.

"Delighted! Anything I can do—only tell me. What is it?"

To her view "helping people" always meant advising them to buy *bric-à-brac*, and who heartily resolved that if it meant furniture, china, or stuffs, she must send Mimo a hint to get out all the best things he had, and to mind all the marks and the millesimes were correct.

Etoile sat down beside her, and told her the story of the dancing-girl who was starving behind the wall of her house.

"The little boy is lovely," she said, when she had ended the sad little history, "and the woman, I am sure, would interest you if you saw her. She would die, and even let the child die, sooner than be faithless to her faithless lover."

Lady Joan listened with cooled interest. Since it was not teacups and triptychs, why was she bored about it?

"Very interesting, no doubt," she said drily. "But rather immoral, don't you think?"

"Immoral? No; there are many things more immoral—Mrs. Henry V. Clams, for instance."

The Lady Joan winced. She hesitated a moment whether she would seem very virtuous or seem very charitable and beyond all prejudices.

"It is too kind of you to be so interested," she said at length. "You must tell it all to Io; he'll be rushing off directly, with soup in one hand and bank-notes in the other. Certainly, the girl's case is very sad: but then, you see, she brought it on herself. Why did she listen to her painter before she saw the marriage-lines? I should think your best way would be to speak to the Austrian Consul, or perhaps your Princess Vera would condescend. I think they'd send her back for nothing, and I suppose she has some friends?"

"None, I believe," said Etoile. "But do not trouble yourself; it will not cost much to set her up in some little trade that will enable her to keep herself and the boy. That is all I meant to ask your advice about."

"Of course I would do anything in charity that I could," said Lady Joan, vaguely feeling that she had made a wrong move. "But a ballet girl and an illegitimate child and all that—one hardly knows what to do. I've just sent a housemaid away for light conduct. One must be just—one must not put a premium on immorality."

"It is a pity Society often allows so high a one!" answered Etoile with that flash of contempt which the Casa Challoner was learning to fear. Lady Joan, however, was always ready for any thrust.

"I don't think Society does," she answered; she always defended Society since Society accepted her. "It gives certain rules, and if you keep to them it has no business to attack you, and never does in point of fact. Women are rash themselves and headstrong, and do foolish things, and then they complain of Society. I've no prejudices—not one—I would just as soon shake hands with your ballet-girl as with a duchess. But, you see, as long as one lives in the world one can't follow every impulse of one's heart, and these poor girls just throw themselves away on some headlong passion, and then think it very cruel of humanity not to be ready with gold christening cups and rose silk cradles for their babies. Their fate's very dreadful and very hard, no doubt, but they make it themselves, you see."

"By forgetting themselves, which women in Society never do, no doubt."

"Of course, they never do, except that ass of a Geltrude Chemnitz! If you don't remember yourself, who will?" said the Lady Joan with a pleasant laugh, ignoring the equivocal. "As for the world well lost for love, and all that, it's rubbish, you know. The world is too strong for anybody that sets up against it. And when you've lost the world, *i.e.*, your bread and cheese in it, loves flies out of the window. That's common sense."

"It would be common sense then if this poor Hungarian descended to infamy to feed herself."

"Just so. Having once slipped into the pit to gather a flower, she ought to go down to the bottom to pick up a bit of silver. But that's the sort of consistency you poetical creatures never possess. You will fling yourselves to perdition in a *furia* of self-sacrifice, and then you are supremely astonished that the world only thinks you a donkey, whose legs are broken. Society can't classify. It only lays down a few broad lines, and packs into two sets the people who keep in 'em, and the people who jump over 'em. Unjust? Oh, I dare say. But the thing is so. It's no good kicking against the pricks. No doubt Magdalen is a charming person, utterly underrated, and very much misjudged, and all the rest of it; but all that common folk can judge by is that she has dragged her hair in the dust, and has made a beast of herself——"

"Without corresponding advantages!"

Lady Joan laughed, but when she was on her high horse of morality, she rode it with cynicism indeed, but with consummate coolness, and would now and then enumerate opinions with which Hannah More herself could have found no fault. Indeed, to do her justice, women who sacrificed themselves—at a loss—did seem to her "too poor for heaven, and too pale for hell."

"I am shocked at you," she said, with her frankest smile. "What is the use of railing against Society? Society, after all, is only Humanity *en masse*, and the opinion of it must be the opinion of the bulk of human minds. Complaints against Society are like the lions' against the man's picture. No doubt the lions would have painted the combat as going just the other way, but then, so long as it is the man who has the knife or the gun, and the palette and the pencil, where is the use of the lions howling about injustice? Society has the knife and the pencil; that's the long and the short of it; and if people don't behave themselves they feel 'em both, and have to knock under. They're knifed first, and then caricatured—as the lions were. I can't see so much injustice myself. The world's a very pleasant place, if you'll only keep straight in it."

And the Lady Joan pulled up the ruffles of old lace about

her shapely throat, and glanced with a little grin at two big envelopes just come in : invitations to a ball at the Macscrips, and a dramatic representation at one of the minor Legations.

Etoile bade her good evening, and went away ; left alone, she snapped her fingers at the deserted tea-table, jumped a step or two of a bolero, lit a cigar, and going to her chamber, got into a gown of loose eastern brocade with gold threads shining in it, twisted a string of amber beads round her head, and felt dressed appropriately for the guests she expected : Victor Louche, a second-class French dramatist, and M. Ronsoulet, a very great sculptor, with Madame Pâtauge, who was Madame Ronsoulet *de facto*, but not *de jure*. They were tonic that she required after a Wednesday afternoon.

Society is like the porter of your Paris house. It frowns and bars the door, or rushes to bring all the keys to you, according as you have filled its pockets, or have left them empty. Lady Joan knew her porter.

She was not rich, indeed, not even with all the teacups and triptychs in the world ; but then she knew how to be obliging ; she would run up the back stairs to spare the porter any trouble about the front, and when the porter was grumpiest and sulkiest, would look up in his face and smile. No porter could long resist such conduct : not even the grim portress that is called Mrs. Grundy.

But there is an amount of fatigue in being so very considerate to your porter, and Lady Joan always recompensed herself for her consideration with some little pleasant indulgence or other, when the porter could not see through her keyhole.

In a sense, too, she liked the sharp and strong contrasts of her life. She loved the bisque soup after the barley broth ; the caviare toast after the boiled sole with herbs. She liked keeping the goats and the sheep apart, and frisking up the wild glens with the one, and feeding in the fat pastures with the other. She liked lunching decorously off cold lamb with a clergyman's family, and talking of her dear friends the deans and the bishops, and she liked going to an artists' ball afterwards, and dancing and screaming till the daylight shone in at the windows. She liked driving staidly about with her great cousin of Hebrides with the white-wanded footmen of Hebrides behind, and she liked rattling the same nights about the streets, in the white Roman moonlight, in a hired cab, with her friends, singing choruses. She liked having a bevy of married and maiden dames to tea on a Tuesday afternoon, and enchanting them with old laces miraculously purchased, and pattern opinions miraculously fabricated ; and she liked dining at home that evening with a few choice spirits who quoted Baudelaire in

a haze of smoke, and brought out the suggestive little statuettes, and held that none but fools could believe in any deity under any name, and quoted as the amatory gospel, "*l'amour, c'est la femme d'un autre.*"

On the whole, there was much wisdom in these ways of life. She saw life in all its aspects, and got credit from all its actors. And she seldom made mistakes in either the dull comedy or the gay one—except, indeed, when sometimes she talked too long to a cynic or met the eyes of a guileless woman.

At such times she would quail a little, and feel as though, despite all her cashmeres of conventionality and sables of content, some one had stript her naked in the full blaze of a noon-day sun.

Her guests came in all together, laughing, happy, and good-humoured, bringing with them much sparkle of fresh wit, and much smell of stale smoke, into the chambers where Mrs. Grundy had sat in august majesty but an hour before.

Victor Louche was a thin, sallow man, with a pungent tongue and a salacious humour, who lived amongst actors and actresses, and was the life and soul of winter nights at Bignon's, and summer days at Etretat; Madame Pâtauge was a cheery soul, with much mirth, many anecdotes, and a repertory of all the liveliest songs of the last half-century, which she could still sing with power and zest, like the female Lablache that she was. Madame Pâtauge, originally the daughter of a house-porter in Paris, in days when Louis Philippe was king, knew her Paris as a child its nurse; she had gone on the stage of the Opéra Comique and been successful; she had married a journalist, who had beaten her and spent her money; she had consoled herself in the atelier of M. Ronsoulet, when he was unknown to fame, and had finally settled down permanently side by side with him when he became famous. She was a very big woman, with a very big voice, and M. Ronsoulet, who was a very little man, spent life much as a pigmy might do chained between the four paws of an elephant. But it was a good-natured elephant, and was totally unconscious that it crushed him; it thought, indeed, that carrying him about by its trunk was a benefit; female elephants have these delusions.

She was an honest soul; she never sought to conceal what she had been, or what she was; when she had quarrelled with her husband she had abused him soundly, packed up her trunks, and departed from under his roof, with the frankest avowal of her intentions; she never concealed either the storms or the sunshine of her adventurous years; and she adored Ronsoulet with an adoration as big as her person. Nevertheless, a world which accepted the Lady Joan rejected this poor Madame, who was only Ronsoulet by courtesy. She was *mal vue* by Society,

though she was a hundred times the better, truer, tenderer, and worthier woman. In fact, Society would have blushed to have been supposed to have even known the mere fact of her existence.

Lady Joan invited this trio of sorry sinners to dinner because the songs and anecdotes tickled her palate; because after Mrs. Grundy at tea she required mental tonic and refreshment; because Ronsoulet would make her own bust for nothing; because Victor Louche had always known a good deal about her; because—there were fifty becauses. Besides, nobody knew of these bohemian banquets; her servants never talked; and if she were seen driving up to the little villa outside Porta Pia, where MM. Ronsoulet and Louche were living together, she only went to have her bust modelled—that was all.

“Do you speak to that creature?” said Society to her once, when the good-tempered fat woman smiled, and nodded, and waved hands to her in delighted recognition across the crowd on the Pincio. Such contretemps will now and then occur to the most perfect diplomatists. And the Lady Joan replied with that frank regard which always told her intimate friends when she was lying with the most hardihood:—

“Well, you know, Mr. Challoner’s always telling me I’m too good-natured to people. But I see her at Ronsoulet’s studio. What can I do? One must just bow. I haven’t the heart to cut people; I’m so weak about all that. Besides, you know, I have not the stiff ideas of other women; my poor mother was always so over-kind to all artists. You see *we* are so well known. We can do things other folks can’t. Nobody ever can say a word against us.”

So Society gave her much credit, alike for frankness, spirit, and propriety, a triad seldom allowed to exist in unison; and it was the general feeling in society that she was a very excellent young woman, and that it was high treason against her to suppose for a moment that she had any other attractions up at Fiordelisa than her bees and her beasts, her pigs, and her poultry.

On the whole Lady Joan was as successful as that ingenious smuggler who traded in sheep, to run brandy ashore, and whose upper deck was crowded with innocent lambs, while the alcohol that cheated the revenues reposed cask against cask, all snug and unseen, underneath in the hold.

“Is it worth the trouble?” landsmen wonder, seeing the contraband sloops hover off the Spanish shores; “is it worth so much calculation, so many risks, such constant oscillation between safety and ruin?” The contrabandist will tell you that it is—that no money rings so cheerily as his, and no wine tastes so well.

Lady Joan had the same opinion.

Hers were only small gains like the smuggler's—a duchess's bow, an ambassadress's nod, cards to half a hundred houses, bankers' balls, clergymen's praises, American dinners—no more than the smuggler's dollars and tobacco. But then these were everything to her. Some desire the Apple of Hesperides, others only hunger for a sweet potato. Lady Joan was of this wise other section. And she bought her sweet potato in the right market, and ate it, and was happy.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE Scrope-Stair sisters made a Cerberus quite invaluable stationed for ever at the hall door of the Casa Challoner.

Cerberus of Hades was but a primitive and one-ideaed beast, whose sole office was to prevent miserable sinners from escaping their punishment. This Cerberus of society was a much more civilised being, and had the advanced views proper to its epoch—the epoch that has the Triangle instead of Troy. Cerberus, by alternately fawning and growling, induced Society to swallow the discrepancies of the Casa Challoner, as Cerberus itself had swallowed them. And it is only this first swallowing that is any trouble. An impropriety to Society is like a fishbone in the human throat; fifty to one it will not slip down, but if once it pass all faces are calm; the fishbone is accepted in safety, and will be heard of no more. A little butter will be taken after it—nothing else.

Old Lord George had not utterly forgotten that he had once been a man of the world, though he had adopted an air of sleepy senility, which kept him out of rows and served him well; and old Sir George would watch the Lady Joan with a twinkle in his eye, and take her measure very correctly. He kept his lids half shut, and was very hard of hearing for the majority of the world, and could act a cross between King Lear and Poor Tom with an admirable skill when any quarrel was going on around him. But he had not forgotten that he had once been “handsome Scrope” in the guard-room of St. James's, and he appraised his daughter's friend very neatly, and did not like his daughter's friendship. But what could he do all alone?

Middleway stayed up there; the pious Middleway, who talked of Providence as his own Senior Partner, and of Paradise as a

sort of bonus awarded for thrifty and timely insurance; Middleway dined at the Casa Challoner, and took his beloved girls to Fiordelisa, strong in their maiden innocence and their blond chignons. To be sure there was the Seventh Commandment printed amongst its brethren in any church where Middleway officiated; the Seventh Commandment in all the glaring outspokenness and culpable heedlessness of the feelings of Society, of which Moses, like too many other great writers, was guilty, and there were times when the excellent Middleway felt that the Decalogue ought, like the Decameron, to be edited in more polite language. But still, qualms or no qualms, Middleway lunched with Mrs. Henry V. Clams, and visited at Fiordelisa, and where Middleway, austere though charitable, boldly trod, how should poor old trembling Lord George dare to refuse to enter?

Besides, there was Marjory!

At the thought of Marjory all rebellion would die out of him; Marjory, with her pinched lips, her sharp voice, and her resolute will, who, if he ventured to cross her wishes, would never let him have a brazier of charcoal, or a glass of whisky, or a bank-note in his pocket ever again throughout his dreary days, but would remind him fifty times oftener than she did already, that if he had not been a spendthrift his daughters would not now have to trudge through mud and dust to copy gallery canvases and chapel frescoes. There was Middleway and there was Marjory—so old Lord George stifled his conscience, and let the mutton from Fiordelisa be set upon his table, and the eggs from Fiordelisa be broken into his sherry, and pretended to be dozing in the sun when the Lady Joan on the terrace of Fiordelisa called Ioris to her feet. He was a gentleman at heart, this poor worn-out, weary octogenarian; he had been an English soldier, and was still an English gentleman, and sometimes he felt ashamed. But he had grown timid with age, and his home was chill and dreary, and his daughters bade him obey, and he did obey, and Lady Joan sent him new eggs and fresh vegetables with the most grateful regularity. She had grown rather bored with Cerberus, but Cerberus was still very useful to her, and she threw the admirable watch-dog the tit-bits she knew it desired.

She called them darling girls, though they were older than herself, had them always to her second-rate dinners, gave them patterns for gowns, took them to the theatres, sent them game and honey and wine, had them to stay at Fiordelisa, and above all, let Marjory feast her eyes on Ioris.

Poor Marjory, in the beginning of time when Lady Joan had first arrived from Abana and Pharphar, Orontes and Euphrates, with her huntress's blood all on fire for want of something to kill, had not been a watch-dog, she had been a catspaw.

Before Lady Joan had reached the sublime heights of intrepidity from which she now invited the Church to lunch up at Fiordelisa, whilst she was still under that certain chill and awe of that vision of the British *Bona Dea* which had loomed before her on her landing at Brindisi, she had deemed it worth while to be prudent.

In pursuit of prudence she had bade Ioris pay a semblance of court to her dear friend Marjory, and took Marjory about with her conspicuously. Ioris laughed, pitied himself, and obeyed. He played his part gracefully in the meaningless comedy, and its victim based upon it her wildest hopes, as baseless as they were wild. When she perceived that she had been but fooled—used as the mere screen of another's convenience—the passion of that fading hope survived the death of hope. She consumed her heart in rage and misery, but consumed it in silence. To break with the Casa Challoner would have been to lose all sight of Ioris; she continued to kiss her friend in public and private, and nurtured her unspoken passion in her breast, feeding it hungrily on every look and tone and gesture of her friend's lover. She saw what her friend did not see; she foresaw the time when the proverb would hold good that too much tying loosens. She marked her friend's mistakes, and gauged the power of her friend's tyranny, she saw when the chain was strained, and laid in wait for some dim future, as the grey adder hides under the stone.

She loved him with the terrible love of the woman who hungers for a life that will no more come to her than the silver moon in summer will come to a child's cries; who knows that his hours, his thoughts, his senses, are all another's and will never be hers, yet dreams of some day when disaster or disappointment may drag him down within her grasp, and whispers in the hush of the night to her own sick soul—"Who knows, who knows?"

The comedy had long ceased to be played and the years had gone by since then, but the desire of the moth for the star still burnt on, and the gentle grace, the tender familiarity, the kindly courtesy of his ways with women, fed the smouldering fire with every unthinking action; she knew that it was useless, hopeless, rootless, but still, in the dreary routine and repression of her days, she hugged closer this one sweetness: only to see him, hear him, be where he was, this she deemed better than nought; she fought so firmly for the Temple of All the Virtues because on its altars her own hopes smouldered, and when she defended the innocence of its rites there was so robust a ring of sincerity in her voice because it hurt her so fiercely to think of those long amorous summers, which the nightingales of Fiordelisa hymned.

Lady Joan knew her folly well enough, and gleefully grinned

over it in secret, and even approved of it. It was useful to her, the one supreme test-weight by which the Lady Joan balanced all things.

"If the poor ass like to fret herself to fiddle-strings after Io—let her," said the Lady Joan in her thoughts; and Lady Joan in public kissed her with effusion, before a dozen spinsters, and took her often to the theatres, and said to everybody, "If Io would only be persuaded to marry that dear darling good girl!—but he won't hear of it, you know—such a pity—such friends as we all are, it would be delightful!"

Meantime, Marjory Scrope grew passive, if not resigned, as the seasons swept on, and accepted the reign of the Lady Joan as inevitable, and would have been even willing to make common cause with her against any invader of her sovereignty; and, sharp of eye and ear, saw many a sign that escaped the happy and blind vanity of her friend: heard many a yawn, detected many a gesture of weariness and impatience, and had almost ceased to be jealous of what she saw had to him become but a habit. But at any gleam of a fresh interest, any glance of a new thought for him, she sprang up as a snake springs—not the Lady Joan herself could ever have been as swift to see it, as ferocious to resent it, as she was.

And, with the prescience of an unerring way, the hatred of Marjory Scrope-Stairs had darted down and fastened on Etoile.

Marjory, indeed, was hardly used. Jacob for Rachel had not served more devotedly than she for six years had served the Lady Joan for the wage of proximity to Ioris. She had toiled early and late; she had copied old frescoes and let the Lady Joan sell them; she had worked chairs and cushions, and finished lace that her friend had begun and got tired of; she had never minded being asked at the eleventh hour to fill up a place at a dinner, unexpectedly left vacant; she had trudged through sludge and sleet on bitter winter days, to ransack curiosity barrows for the Casa Challoner; and, finally, she had gone about in society armed *cap-à-pie* in defence of that Temple of all the Virtues, and made herself generally ridiculous with a stubbornness and a heroism worthy of a far better cause. She had led a hard, dull, joyless life. She had been a watch-dog, and been bound to take blows and be out in all weathers; she had been a screen and had borne all the brunt of the fire, and been pushed aside when not wanted; she had been a catspaw, and was left with burnt fingers and sore heart out in the cold whilst her clever friend gleefully munched the fruit. She had been hardly dealt with for six mortal years; but she had been able to bear it all for sake of that baseless, shapeless, yet inextinguishable hope which had sustained her. She had grown used, with the dull pain of an old half-healed wound, to seeing the supremacy of the Lady Joan.

But now!—She hated the newcomer with that deadly hatred which has no pity as it has no parallel; the hatred of an obscure and discontented woman for the woman who is eminent and adored.

Etoile herself never thought about her at all, save to feel compassion for her vaguely as the slavey of Society, and the shadow of the Lady Joan. But Marjory Scrope thought of her from morn till night, watched her gestures, studied her every word, hated her for the very *frou-frou* of her skirts, the mere silent softness of her sweeping velvets; hated her beyond all for the look that the eyes of Ioris gained whenever they gazed on her; and in the stillness of the nights dreamed of her, and waking, muttered, “I have borne enough—never will I bear *that!*—never, never, never!”

“Take the watering-pot,” had said that wise woman of the world, Lady Cardiff.

Perhaps, if Etoile had taken the watering-pot—if she had drunk tea at the Scrope-Stairs, given the Scrope-Stairs a few pretty things, praised the Scrope-Stair drawings, and bought a water-colour of the School of Athens—even this sandstorm of envy and hatred might have been allayed. But that was not her way.

“My dear, you never seem to fear the mob,” said Lady Cardiff. “It is just the mob that builds up guillotines; and the woman who has genius is just Marie Antoinette to it, ‘the accursed proud Austrian’—and the mob howls till the axe falls.”

No doubt it was a true exordium: but Etoile feared the mob no more than did the daughter of Maria Theresa.

This night, when the Lady Joan sternly bade her knight attend the knightless damsels to their home, Ioris obeyed. He was aware of the hopeless passion he had long before inspired, and pitied the woman who felt it, and was friends with her in the same kindly, courtly, gentle spirit with which he took off his hat to the old orange woman at the corner, and asked the cobbler’s wife in the cellar how her rheumatism fared. It was tiresome to him to go out of his way in the damp chilly night, with the snow beginning to fall, to escort Cerberus whom his mistress had chosen for the nonce to dress up as a Una, without a lion. But he did the behest chivalrously, and went with the sisters gaily and courteously to their dull, old, dark, long palace down by the Forum Trajano, and having discharged his duty, thought that he had justly earned a little recreation.

Ioris, with people he disliked, was apt to pour out on them a graceful effusion which they took for cordiality and regard. They were never more mistaken in their lives. To women who wearied him, to men he mistrusted, to enemies always, and to

strangers generally, Ioris was courtier enough by habit, and meridional enough in nature, to be unrelaxing in courtesy, and ardent in protestation; amiability is the armour of the South, as much as rudeness is of the North.

In the dusk on the staircase that night, Ioris as he had escorted Cerberus had seen a jewel shining on the stone, had stooped for it, and recognised a black onyx medallion, with a monogram in pearls, which he remembered seeing once about the throat of Etoile. He did not send it upstairs to her by the servant, as he might have done, since he had left her sitting by the fire, but said nothing of it to his companions, and slipped it into his pocket. His escort ended, and the sisters safe at home, he went to his own home, dined hastily, and calling about eight o'clock at the house on the Monte Cavallo, sent to know if the Comtesse d'Avesnes would receive him.

Etoile, her own brief dinner ended, was sitting in a low chair by the hearth, with great Tsar at her feet, looking over some old prints, Marcantonios amidst them, which she had bought that morning.

The room was large, but warm; big bowls of flowers stood on the marble tables; old tapestries and embroideries were scattered about, there were sketches here and there; the hearth was wide and open; oak logs were burning on it, and their flame shone red on the *giallo antico* of its huge carved chimneypiece; a marble copy of the Belvedere Mercury which she had bought stood near, with a cluster of rose-red azaleas in vases around it; and a bronze of the Vatican Jove was half-hidden in white camellias. A certain sense of home fell on Ioris as he entered—a sense that never touched him in his own lonely house or within the chambers of the Casa Challoner.

Etoile, who was dressed in white stuffs, that fell softly about her, and had a knot of geranium at her throat, turned, with a smile, as she saw him.

"Is it anything very urgent? Has Lady Joan found a fault in the Venetian costume?"

A shadow passed over his mobile face at the name; he came forward and dropped on one knee by the hearth.

"Nothing urgent; and perhaps you will rebuke me for an intrusive impertinence. I had the fortune to find this to-night, and I could not resist restoring it into your own hands."

She gave a cry of pleasure.

"Oh, that is very good of you. My dear locket! I had just sent to advertise for it. You shall look in it for your reward."

"May I indeed?"

She pressed the secret spring for him, and he saw the portrait of Dorotea Coronis.

His heart beat with a quick relief. He had expected to see some face of his own sex.

"The Duchesse Santorin is very happy to have such a friend," he said gravely.

"But you barely look at it; there is no more beautiful face in Europe."

"I do not care to look at it," said Ioris, and his soft eyes gazed at her own face.

Etoile felt her cheek grow warm—she could not tell why—and she drew a little away.

"Make Tsar move farther—he has very bad manners—and rise up, Prince Ioris. There is a pleasant chair there."

"Will you not call me Io? Every one does."

"I do not care to do what every one does," she answered him, a little impatiently. She seemed to hear the "Io! Io!" of Lady Joan's imperious demands ringing loudly over hill and vale by the banks of the Almo.

He caressed Tsar, and sank into the chair near her, within the warmth of the hearth.

"You are all alone? You are going to spend your evening alone?"

She smiled.

"'Never less alone than when alone.' It is fortunate for me that I feel so, for I have always been left very much to myself."

"But surely——"

"You mean I might be out somewhere to-night? Oh yes: and any other nights. But I do not care very much for society—not even for that of Paris. In my own house there I receive a good deal: that I like; but society is monotonous: it has no infinite variety, as study has and art. Besides, I think the artist, like the saint, should keep himself 'unspotted from the world' as far as possible. It only dims our sight and dwarfs our aims."

"And you are not very strong in health, I fear."

"They say so. Perhaps I have tried to do too much too early."

"The perfect fruit and flower have been too much for the young tree that bore them."

"Perfect! Ah, if you could only know how ill-content I am with all that men call great in what I do; how poor and pale the best is beside the visions that I see!"

"That of course. What Raffaello has left us must be to the glories he imagined as the weaver's dye to the sunset's fires. Tell me—you have been in Rome before?"

"Never. I studied in Belgium and in Paris—nowhere else; but to be taught by Istrion was almost an atonement for the loss of Rome. But it is because I lost Rome in my student days that I cannot endure to waste any hours here in the mere distractions of Society which I can have anywhere else. In your city it is

so easy to 'be with the immortals.' I wander in your wonderful haunted places as long as it is light, and then when evening comes on I am tired."

"You do wisely for yourself—though cruelly to others."

"Ah, pray do not make me compliments: I dislike them. We are not in Society now; we can be natural."

"You always doubt my sincerity."

"No, not always. Tsar would not like you so well if you could not be true sometimes."

Ioris lifted up the noble head of the dog and kissed him.

"I think I am always true—except when *she* makes me false," he murmured as he stooped to the hound. "Madame, tell me more of yourself. You cannot think what interest it has for me. Nay, I am saying no flattery now, but the simplest fact. When the world says 'Etoile' every one wonders; I have wondered with the rest. Do not be angered."

"Why should I be? I will tell you anything you like. Not that there is much to tell. My years are written on my panels and canvases. I have lived between the studio and the open air."

There was something dreamy and familiar in the warm, wood-scented air, the mellow light, the bright hearth, the shadowy, fragrant chamber. It seemed to Ioris that he had been there all his life watching the glow from the fire fall on the white folds of her dress and finding out the red geraniums at her throat; whilst little by little, in the easy communicativeness of fireside talk, the various changes of her life, with its ambitions and its fruitions, passed before him, and her words built up to his fancy the little village on the green Meuse waters and the old house by the gardens of the Luxembourg.

Etoile very seldom spoke of herself.

She had grown to see that no one ever believed a word she said; so silence had become a habit with her.

What they expected she did not know; nor, perhaps, did they any better. But the mere truth never had a chance of being credited. It never has.

"Truth is a gem that loves the deep" applies to truth metaphysical, historical, philosophical. But truth personal is rather a flower like the briar rose, too homely, too simple, and too thorny for men to care to gather it. They like a lie, which, like the barometrical flower, will change its colour half a dozen times a day.

With Ioris she had a different feeling. She was willing to talk to him, glad to take him back with her in fancy to her childish days. He listened with that soft, mute attention, that homage of scarce-broken silence, which his gaze made more eloquent than the most eager words of other men. The firelight

shone on his delicate dark head; his eyes were dreamy, musing, tender. The moments sped swiftly away and became hours. At last he drew a deep breath, as of a man who casts off a burden of dread.

"And amidst it all—you have never loved!"

"Loved!" echoed Etoile, in a vague, startled sort of surprise. Her face grew warm; she felt troubled, she could not have told why.

"Is it true?" he persisted. "It is true, is it not, you have never loved any one?"

Etoile bent forward and put back a burning piece of wood that had fallen too far. As she did so one of the geranium flowers fell out from amongst the blossoms at her throat. He caught it from the fire.

"Answer me," he said eagerly. "Is it true?"

"Certainly true—yes. But I do not know why——"

He put the scarlet flower in his breast.

"Why I have the daring to ask you so personal a question? Only to ask it seems a profanation, and I need not have asked it—for I knew——"

"What can you mean? What can you know?"

"I knew that it was so before you spoke a word. The first night I saw you I said in my thoughts, 'That woman has no past;' for a woman who has had no passion has no past, no more than those flowers, born to-day, that are at your breast. Then I studied those scattered poems that are signed 'Etoile,' and I was yet more sure. You write of love from without, not from within. It is a thing you have read of, dreamed of, built up to yourself in fancy, but have not felt. You theorise on it externally, as you might of life in some far planet more beautiful than earth. But love, you know—no, you do not know—is a fiercer, fonder, ay, and perhaps a grosser and viler thing than you have ever been touched by. You have said to yourself, 'I shall love like that some day.' You have not said to yourself, 'I loved like that in a day that is dead.' Now, between those two there is such a gulf—such an abyss—such a sea of flame! And when you have crossed that gulf you will not look at us all any longer with those clear, candid, wondering eyes, as if you had strayed down out of a better world than ours. No; then you will only look back, and you will be no longer pure of heart, as you are now. Tell me: am I not right?"

A flush went over her face. He was half-leaning, half-kneeling by her; his eyes watched her with a dreamy pleasure in them, half-sensual, half-spiritual.

He was utterly in earnest as he spoke; he meant truly what he uttered; but he was a master in the power of casting sweet trouble into a woman's soul, and there was an added pleasure to

him when the soul was deep and calm like a lake and his was the first hand to drop either a pearl or a stone into its depths.

"Am I not right?" he murmured softly.

She pushed her hair back from her forehead a little wearily and with a sense of confusion.

"Yes—oh yes," she answered him, "I suppose a woman's life without love is incomplete. I suppose I only sleep; but I can care for no one—in that way. Art alone moves me."

He had risen as he had spoken last; and now, bending downward with exquisite grace, he touched her hand with his lips as softly as a bird's wing might brush a rose in passing.

"Happy he for whom you shall awake," he murmured as he stooped.

Then he glanced at the clock, bowed low, caressed the dog, and went.

The clock-hands stood at eleven.

Etoile sat without moving as he had left her gazing into the fire. A nameless emotion stirred within her and made her pulse thrill. A troubled pain, that yet was not pain at all, was on her. "What have I missed?" she wondered; and then her face grew warm again, and she rose with a restless impatience of herself, not understanding what ailed her.

Meanwhile Ioris passed out into the moonlit night, which was cold and wet, flinging his furs about him in the teeth of the north wind, and, with the geranium flower hidden in his breast, mounted the staircase of the Casa Challoner.

At the Casa Challoner the dinner had been gay, but Lady Joan had been gloomy.

In vain did Victor Louche tell his best stories, and Madame Pâturge cap them with still better; in vain did both of them sing the funniest and naughtiest songs that theatres and *cafés-chantants* had ever rung with; in vain did they disport themselves and earn their truffles and their wine and their entrance into the Temple of All the Virtues—in vain: the brow of the Lady Joan was dark, her high spirits had departed, and her eyes were as two scimitars flashing ominously in moonlight.

Victor Louche, innocent or malicious, called out from the piano at eleven o'clock, "Ah, *pardieu!* where is Prince Io? I thought I missed something familiar from the *menu*."

The cheery Pâturge from a capacious chair sent out a cone of tobacco-smoke.

"Ah, yes, where is Prince Charming? It seemed to me there was something wanting. You have never quarrelled with him, *ma mie?* He is too delightful. Such manners! Ah!"

"Quarrel!" said the Lady scornfully. "Who *could* quarrel with Io? Quarrel with a bean-stalk! That's more character than he has."

"Jealous: who of, I wonder?" thought the astute Victor, with a crash of the chords.

Mr. Challoner was, as usual, in his own sanctum, with the *Times* and the Share-list.

Madame Pâturge looked across at Monsieur Ronsoulet and winked; but the wink was lost on him: he was thinking of his statue of Palestrina for the new Opera-house, and a little of the *châteaubriand* at dinner. He roused himself slowly to what they were talking about.

"To be sure, where is Ioris?" he muttered. "I never dined here without him before. And there is no one in Europe with a truer or more delicate instinct for the arts. Where is he?"

"I expected him to dinner," said Lady Joan sulkily. When she was out of temper she sometimes told the truth.

The Turkish curtains were at that moment put aside, and through the doorway Ioris entered, kissed Madame Pâturge's hands with gay gallantry, saluted Ronsoulet with reverential friendship, and accosted Victor Louche with a graceful compliment on his last comedy.

"Such perfect manners, *ma mie*. You will never change for the better," said Madame Pâturge in a low tone to her hostess, who, however, did not even hear, but said roughly and curtly to the offender:

"Where have you been?"

"I have dined at home. I found a mass of correspondence."

"I told you to go with the Stairs."

"I accompanied those amiable sisters."

"Well, why didn't you come straight back here?"

"I remembered orders I had to give Giannino at home. I knew you could not miss me—you would be too well amused."

"You've been writing all the evening?"

"Yes."

The eyes of Ioris began to grow a little angry under their long lashes. Victor Louche, who feared a scene, began to sing "*Ca me chatouille dans le nez*."

Madame Pâturge nudged her hostess.

"Perhaps he has been playing at the club, and lost money?"

"To never plays," said the Lady Joan savagely.

There was an awkward silence.

Victor Louche sang very loud and made a great noise with the pedals. Ioris crossed over to M. Ronsoulet.

"*Caro maestro*, how goes the Palestrina?"

"The bean-stalk won't bend for ever," thought Madame Pâturge in her capacious chair.

Fortunately for the preservation of peace there then entered Mimo and Trillo and a youth of three and twenty, Guido Serravalle, who sang a fine second to her favourite ritornello.

Trillo brought her word of an Inspecteur des Beaux-Arts who was coming from Petersburg and would buy a great deal; Mimo of an order that Lord Norwich had given him to find an altar-screen, *trecento*, if possible; and Guido Serravalle brought her a new song and an old lute, inlaid with ivory and silver, as a present. They sufficed to avert the thunders of her wrath; but, even as she hastily reckoned that the lute was certainly worth three or four hundred francs and smiled on the donor, her brow was still dark and her face was still sullen.

The sagacious Madame Pâturge, from her chair blowing clouds of cigarette smoke about her head, watched and winked once more to the slumbering Ronsoulet.

"She is jealous, and he is not. No, he does not even resent that lute; he is only glad that the lute spares him a scene. Ah! there is a storm in the air. I should like to see it break."

But the sagacious Pâturge had not that pleasure—Ioris did not wait for it.

He left the house with Victor Louche, and left the old ivory lute on his mistress's knee, and Guido Serravalle kneeling before her to tune it, with Mimo and Trillo on either side of her, like her tutelary twin deities as they were.

"Ronsoulet," said Madame Pâturge as they went home, "that will not last very long."

"Will it not, my dear?" said Ronsoulet; and he sighed, for experience had taught him that liberty was hard to obtain.

The next morning, while the day was still young, Ioris, in his own little room, taking his coffee, was confronted by an imperious and furious woman. A scene was his fate.

What did he mean? How dared he? Where had he been? What could he say?

The whirlwind broke over his head. The fierce grey eyes flashed like steel. The storm had lost nothing of its violence by having been pent up till noon.

Irritated, annoyed, deafened, surprised, exasperated, he sought refuge in an untruth: he affected jealousy of the old ivory lute.

It was a lie, but it imposed on her. It calmed the troubled waters of her soul. She believed; and believing, consented to be pacified.

So blinded by her credulous vanity was she, that she omitted to notice that all the while he never told her where his evening had been spent.

CHAPTER XVII.

"HE was jealous of poor little Gnido!" thought Lady Joan, with a flash of delight and amusement, an hour after the tempest, as she glanced in the mirror to see if her brow were smooth again and her dress uncrumpled, and hastened from the house of Ioris.

On the threshold, with whom should an unkind fate bring her sharply in contact but Lord and Lady Norwich, ponderous and solemn, their footman behind them, walking feebly down the street to their carriage! They had been to see a neighbouring church which boasted a famous fresco.

Lord and Lady Norwich looked a little stiff; Lady Joan for the moment a little blank. But it was just one of those moments which, like the meetings at the Paris cafés when without her bib-and-tucker, tested her *savoir-faire*, and never found her wanting.

"Oh, dear Lady Norwich," she cried with rapture, "what a fortunate moment to meet you! This is Io's house. You know Io's house? Mr. Challoner brought you the other day to see his tapestries, didn't he?" (Lord and Lady Norwich, still stiffly, assented.) "How I do wish you would come in again now! Will you come in again now? I've just been to see such a lovely old Francia he has found out right away in the mountains. It belongs to a poor old priest, a vicar of a miserable village, who is really almost starving, and never knew the worth of it till Io told him. Mr. Challoner and I have been enchanted with the picture. I'm afraid Robert's just gone, and Io was already out, but I could show you this Francia if you would not mind coming upstairs. You know I do as I like here. Poor dear Io! he's just like my brother. Could you spare me five minutes?"

Lord and Lady Norwich were thawing: they hesitated, mumbled that it was cold, but finally yielded; she was so solicitous and so deferential that they consented to enter the house and to carry their venerable persons and their unimpeachable respectability and dignity up the staircase to see the Francia, which was placed alone in its glory on an old oak easel in one of the entrance chambers.

"Very fine; really very fine," said Lord Norwich, and sat down before it.

The Francia was a real Francia; it had been in the family

of Ioris for as many centuries as have gone by since the tender old painter looked with wet eyes on Raffaele's panel that made him ashamed of the labours of his own long lifetime. There was no doubt about the Francia, which was a treasure and favourite with Ioris; and the slow, torpid heart of Lord Norwich began to quicken with longing for it.

"Wasted in a village presbytery—dear me! dear me!" he said, and shook his head. He was an honourable man; he said straight out that he would give the needy priest the just price for it, and named a large sum.

"I'm sure Io can get it for you for that," said the Lady Joan. "I'm so sorry Io's not home now. He was already gone out when I came in first. But I'll tell him, and let you know this evening for certain."

"Perhaps he may wish to buy it himself?" said Lord Norwich—a scrupulous man, very delicate and hesitating under his pomposity.

Lady Joan laughed.

"Poor dear Io! *Buy* it! He'll have to sell his own pictures more likely, I'm afraid. You know he's so poor, though we try to keep things straight for him in the country. No, he let it hang here on the chance of finding a purchaser for the poor old *vicario*. He'll be so delighted you have seen and fancied it. Io loves to do good. Dear Lady Norwich, are you cold on this marble floor?"

Lady Norwich began to think the rooms were cold: if Lord Norwich had seen enough of the picture she wished to go. This was precisely what Lady Joan wanted her to do. She was afraid every moment that Ioris would come out of his own little room, and she had no means of signalling to him to stay there shut up; and though of course she could readily have explained his appearance on some hypothesis or another, still it was better to avoid it. So she suggested that the apartment was cold.

"Io is so little at home, you know; he is so much with us," she said frankly.

"As if she *would* say that, if there were anything between them!" thought Lady Norwich, and commented on the speech to this effect afterwards to her friends. So Lady Joan piloted them in safety downstairs, and was offered a seat in their carriage, and took it, and drove home to luncheon with these great and excellent people; and having begun the morning with a scene, ended it with a success, like the truly clever woman she was.

"Not like to sell the Francia, Io!" she screamed later in the day. "But you must sell it—you shall sell it. If I hadn't sold it I should have been compromised for life. Would you dare to compromise *me* by telling these old asses the picture is yours?"

A gentleman cannot compromise a woman, even if she has

just made him a stormy scene in an unasked visit to his own house. So Ioris, with an impatient and embittered heart, saw his Francia transferred to the Norwich collection.

The purchase-money was a large sum indeed.

"It will set your poor priest at ease for his life, I hope," said the kindly stupid purchaser, who liked to think people were comfortable through his means.

Ioris bowed in silence.

There was no poor priest to have the purchase-money; but the Lady Joan shortly afterwards bought herself a *rivière* of emeralds that was going cheap, and, from the Cheninitz sales, an old cabinet of the first matchless Boule.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE gardens of the Colonna Palace are amongst the most charming things of Rome. When the iron gate clangs behind you and you climb the ilex-walk to them you will ten to one be all alone. The gardens are just such gardens as Horace and Virgil used to move in; you sit under the shattered pine planted to mark Rienzi's death, and all the temples and towers of the immortal city lie beneath, and the pile of the Capitol soars upward near you, from the mass of roofs, like a cliff from out the sea; the pigeons pace to and fro, the ducks push their flat beaks amongst the grass, swallows skim by, oranges drop, the sound of the many trickling streams and fountains blends with the subdued murmur of the streets far down below. The world holds few sweeter or nobler places to dream in than these gardens of Rienzi's foes.

Etoile found them out, and often went across the piazza to them in the early morning or at the decline of day, with the great dog Tsar.

One afternoon, having passed all the morning in the Vatican galleries with Princess Vera, she entered the gardens to sit and watch the sun sink to his setting. As she sat there, with volumes of Giusti and of Leopardi on her lap, at which she had not even looked, Tsar rose and moved his tail in animated welcome. She glanced downward through the shelving descent of ilex and orange leaves, and saw coming across from the palace, by the little bridge that crossed the street, the figure of Ioris.

Tsar ran headlong down the winding walks and steps to meet him. He came up, caressing the dog, and approached her with uncovered head.

"I saw you from the gallery of the palace; I could not resist ascending. I saw you were looking more at Rome than at your books. You love my city?"

"Ah, what a commonplace! That is only to say that I am not quite soulless."

"Few care for Rome as you do."

"No? To be sure Lady Joan says that it is as dirty as Cairo, as dear as Trouville, as ugly as Brighton, and as great an imposture as Athens. Tastes differ."

He gave an impatient gesture.

"Why must you always speak of *her*? Let me forget that she exists for a moment."

Etoile looked at him a moment, then looked away.

"Do not say those things to me. They are not loyal."

"Loyal! Do slaves give loyalty? You have called me a slave."

She was silent.

"Can loyalty be enforced by cudgels and chains? She thinks it can, but it cannot."

"Tell her so, then: not me."

Ioris sighed impatiently.

"Tell her! How little you know her!" he muttered. He thought of the fierce storms, the violent reproaches, the tempestuous outbursts which avenged the slightest opposition to his tyrant's will.

All that men most dread, and which they have concentrated in the one all-eloquent word a "scene," she could pour out upon his head in any fatal hour that her whim was crossed or wrath excited.

A woman's violence is a mighty power; before it, reason recoils unnerved, justice quails appalled, and peace perishes like a burnt-up scroll; it is a sand-storm, before which courage can do but little: the bravest man can but fall on his face and let it rage on above him.

He walked to and fro, a moment or two, on the level path of the upper terrace; then very wearily rested his elbows on the wall and leaned there near her where she sat.

It was a beautiful afternoon; the sun was still above the dusky lines of the pines of Monte Mario, far away in front, and the warm light tinted the soft, clear olive of his cheek and the delicate, proud outlines of his face.

His face and figure lent themselves to the beauty of any scene. Standing on a reaped field, against the bare poles of the maize, in his white linen dress, with the warm sun about him, he had a poetic, supple, picturesque grace that Leopold Robert would have loved to perpetuate in a Roman sketch; standing in a crowded presence-chamber, with orders hanging to his coat

and a sea of court ladies' laces, and feathers, and diamonds about him, in the waxlight, he had a grave, meditative dignity of beauty that Vandyek would have liked to render in a portrait which should have all the lordly sadness of his Charles Stuart in it.

With Ioris all this was quite unconscious: hence its charm. Nature had made him so: that was all. But his personal graces gave him an irresistible sway over women. This kind of power to charm is like a magician's gift.

Women shall honour great ability, shall behold true manliness, shall be worshipped with knightly reverence, shall be assailed by all the splendour of intellect, shall be wooed with all daring and all humility, and yet shall remain cold, and as untouched, as marble in the quarry. And then there shall come one who has this magic gift—this wand that wakes the sleeping senses, this rose that, slipped into the bosom, banishes all peace, this power of love incarnated,—and though the magician be faithless as the wind, and rootless as the windborn flower, yet in him alone for ever shall be her heaven and her hell.

"What a life is mine!" he said impetuously now, after a long silence. "The life of a lackey! You described it well that day at Fiordelisa. No will of my own; no time of my own; ordered here, ordered there; dragging through the same endless and joyless routine. The lackey has more liberty than I, for he at least stipulates for some few hours of freedom. What future can I look forward to? I dare not look forward; a dead blank faces me—faces me everywhere. With no home, with no interest, with no children, with no hope, is it worth while living? At times I envy the very mules that creep past me with their loads: they are less sensible of the weight they bear than I am."

Etoile looked at him and felt a pang at her own heart: half of pity, half of pain. She could not doubt the sincerity of this passionate lament.

"But your friendship——" she murmured, and then paused, with the colour in her face.

It was not friendship that thus dragged upon his life. She felt ashamed to speak the sorry lie Society allows and loves.

Ioris, with one of his swift changes of mood, and uneasily conscious that he had betrayed himself too far, turned and laughed carelessly.

"Friendship! Ah! yes. Friendship means anything—everything—from deadliest hate and hottest love downward to the zero of complete indifference! There is only Tsar, I think, who really gives one the honest friendship of a bygone day."

He drew the dog to him and caressed him, and sank down on the bench beside her, and talked of Leopardi, whom he had known when he himself had been a little child, and together

they watched the pile of the Capitol grow dark and the sun descend behind the purples of the pines; together they left the gardens, that grew drear and cold when once the sun had set, and passed across the square in the fleeting twilight.

At her door he bade her adieu, and with a heavy heart and a reluctant step went slowly back to the house which stood to him in the stead of home—a bastard home, warmed with the dull fires of a worn-out passion; he felt a great reluctance to enter, an utter weariness of all he would encounter.

Day after day, night after night, the comedy was always the same. The curt command, the hard contempt, the commercial discussion, the sensual gaze, the trite caress, the hollow ecstacy—he knew them all, one after another, so well—so horribly well. His heart failed him as he mounted the long stone staircase and entered the familiar atmosphere, haunted with stale smoke and stirred by the twang of the mandoline.

He hated the scent; he hated the sounds. They were all fraught to him with the sickliness of an enforced habit, of a perpetual repetition. Shining eyes flashing through tobacco-mist over a ribboned guitar may be intoxicating for six hours, six weeks, even six months. But for six years! . . .

In six years the laugh palls, the songs jar, the eyes repel.

A sense of dulness and jaded effort fell on him always now whenever he crossed the threshold of that too terribly well-known room. The deadly apathy of a familiarity that is not hallowed by any sense of sanctity or sweetness fell on him, heavy as lead, whenever he entered her dwelling. He knew all that would be said and done, all that would be expected and exacted; it had no more interest for him than a comedy that has run three hundred nights has for the stall-keepers.

A woman need never dread the fiercest quarrel with her lover; the tempest may bring sweeter weather than any it broke up, and after the thunder the singing of birds will sound lovelier than before. Anger will not extinguish love, nor will scorn trample it dead; jealousy will fan its fires, and offences against it may but fasten closer its fetters that it adores beyond all liberty. But when love dies of a worn-out familiarity it perishes for ever and aye.

Jaded, disenchanted, wearied, indifferent, the tired passion expires of sheer listlessness and contemptuous disillusion.

The death is slow and unperceived, but it is sure; and it is a death that has no resurrection.

This was how the passion which the Lady Joan desired to cudgel into immortality, was dying now.

When he entered the Turkish room this afternoon he found her the centre of an adoring circle of half a dozen youths, with the white-haired Silverly Bell and the very dear old Mimo as

more solid ballast. She was surrounded by sketches of costumes, Eastern stuffs, strings of sequins, and damascened weapons, and was discussing her own and her companions' attire at a fancy ball to be given by the Echéances.

"How late you are, Io! Where have you been all this time?" she said in greeting, a heavy frown upon her brows.

"With the King of Denmark," answered Ioris.

"What? Why, Almeria's in attendance on him."

"Almeria is indisposed. They sent for me."

Lady Joan looked at him sharply. She had a vague suspicion that there was something withheld from her.

"Where did the king go?" she pursued, being possessed with the common feminine belief that catechisms produce truth as their results.

"To the galleries," answered Ioris.

"Will he buy while he's here?" said the Lady Joan, her thoughts reverting to business and her eyes to Burletta.

Ioris shrugged his shoulders.

"I really cannot say."

Then he took up the day's *Fanfulla* and sat down near the window, whilst she returned to her costumes and her courtiers, and put on her yashmaks and rattled her tambourines, and screamed at the youths' jokes and smiled on their homage, and petted her dear old friends Silverly and Mimo so cleverly that neither was envious of the other.

"How different it is with her!" he mused, with a sigh, to himself.

Etoile had become "her" in his thoughts.

"You're as grave as an owl, Io," cried the Lady Joan, snapping her fingers in his face as six o'clock sounded, and she dismissed her slaves, and threw the windows open to let the cigar smoke out, since the Dean of St. Edmund's and the Lady Barbara, his wife, were going to dine with her, and other eminent respectabilities were to meet them; and her well-trained servant was already clearing away the French songs, and the cigar-ash, and the costumes, and the tambourines, and laying out in their stead grave English journals and reports of Academies of Art and Science.

She was careful to give many dinners, and good ones. She knew that money laid out on plovers' eggs and truffles, green peas in winter, and salmon from the North, sherries from the Xeres plains, and clarets from the Garonne's banks, will bring forth high interest in the shape of much long-suffering from a propitiated, and by consequence pardoning, Society.

She had never read the *Satyricon*, and perhaps never heard of it, but she acted on the principle inculcated by the priestess Enothea. In this age, as in that, two broad gold pieces, pro-

vided they be big enough, will buy the right to kill the sacred goose of the temple and even to cook it too.

The world is like aged Ænothea.

"Slay the divine bird! oh, vilest sinner!" she cried, and banged her trencher down in ruthless rain of blows; but, softening at the sight of a well-filled hand, she relented. "Nay, sweet youth, it was but in love and fear for thee I scolded. Nay, I promise thee, surely it shall be known to none. And since the bird is dead it were of no avail to avenge it; I will strip it in thine honour, and we will make merry over its baked meats!"

Society has not changed much since the *Satyricon*. It has invented prettier names for the old vices—that is all.

Ioris now moved from her touch with that petulance which took in him the charm of a woman's grace and a woman's waywardness.

"*Curissima mia!* One does not feel flattered when you take such ardent interest in young lads of twenty that can warble a café ballad; and, as you only reproach me when I come here, and amuse yourself with others, why should I endeavour to do anything but grave?"

She did not know the secret of the impatience which moved him, the comparison with the thoughts and ways of another woman that he instituted to her own loss in his own meditations. She believed that he was angered at her attention to the young men, as he had been angry at the ivory lute, and such anger argued jealousy, and jealousy had been very quiet in him for some years. She was delighted at its revival.

"What a goose you are! Go home and dress," she cried gaily to him as she disappeared into her own chamber. He caught her hand and detained her a moment.

"Who dines with you to-night? I forget."

"Oh, a heap of great people. Bores of the first water. Just the folks that always make me want to dance the Cancan in their faces, and make the seventh heaven of Mr. Challoner."

"You have not asked,—the Comtesse d'Avesnes?"

"Etoile! My dear Io! Are you mad? What, ask a Paris Sappho to meet the Dean of St. Edmund's and the Countess of Norwich! When will you understand the decorum of the inviolate isle of fogs and fogies?"

And the Lady Joan went into her dressing-room with a laugh and shut the door, to glance over the London reviews on the Dean's learned study of the "Use and Import of the Letter Koph."

Ioris went out, and down the stairs thoughtfully. He was not at ease; he felt as if he had heard a blasphemy, and had let it pass, unrebuked, out of cowardice.

Lady Joan, her study of the Letter Koph completed, went to

her toilette in a contented and radiant mood, and had her velvet dress put on, and ran a gilt spadella through her dark braids, and clasped a gilt waist-belt round her, and saw that she looked very well.

"He was actually jealous of those nice boys! What fun it is! Poor Io!" she thought to herself with that complacent pity for the sufferer from her own fascinations which is the greatest enjoyment of a very vain woman.

She was enraptured to think that the old folly was in him still, and she was in happy ignorance of the workings of his thoughts.

He was jealous! She smiled at herself in the glass, with perfect satisfaction. After six years he was still jealous!

He was jealous—poor Io!

Lady Joan smiled at herself, thinking of Abana and Phaphar, Orontes and Euphrates; and so in perfect good humour went into her drawing-room, to form a domestic picture on the hearthrug with her husband and child, by the time that Lord and Lady Norwich and the Dean of St. Edmund's and his wife entered, coming all together from the Hôtel des Iles Britanniques.

She was on such good terms with herself that she behaved with admirable composure throughout five hours of dreary and dignified platitudes, and enraptured the Dean with her sound views of the dangers of Christianity from the Greek Church, and thanked Lady Barbara with effusion for a promised recipe for knitting children's woollen stockings.

"We have only one treasure, you know," said Lady Joan, with her warmest smile, "and I like to fancy she wears anything of my own making when I can!"

"Such a natural sentiment!" rejoined the Dean's wife, quite touched. She had left sons and daughters of all ages in the monastic shades of St. Edmund's, and worshipped them.

"What an excellent young woman that is, my dear!" said Lady Barbara to the Dean as they drove home to their hotel. "And such a devoted mother too, evidently."

"A vastly agreeable woman," murmured the Dean, in tones as soft and thick as the *tête de crème* he had been drinking. "Good common sense in her—no superficiality—her remarks about my pamphlet were really astonishingly clever. Quite a deep knowledge for a woman. A very bad marriage she made; a very bad marriage. I remember wondering at it at the time. But it seems to have turned out remarkably well—house nicely appointed—nice dinner—that sturgeon was particularly well done."

"And Mr. Challoner such a good creature."

"Sensible man; something in the East, wasn't he? Consul

—carpets—something that began with a C, I know. Asked me to go with him to see a Gentile da Fabriano that is to be had as a wonderful bargain.”

“Oh yes, she told me all about it. It belongs to that striking-looking man that sat quite silent at dinner, an Italian, a great friend of theirs; he’d been with the King of Denmark all day; and I fancy he’s very poor by what she said—that it would be a charity.”

“Ah! the Italians always are as poor as church rats. Certainly, let us go and see it. I always admire Gentile and all that school of Early Upper Italy. They are very kind people evidently—excellent people.”

So the Dean of St. Edmund’s droned himself into a doze, and was ready whenever he should go back to his cloister to vow in society everywhere that by all his clerical dignity Joan Challoner was the most estimable of her sex; and his wife was ready to second him.

Thus just by reading about the letter Koph for ten minutes, and by begging a recipe to knit woollen stockings, she secured champions in the Church of England, and sold a picture next day at a net profit of three hundred pounds.

“Have I a soul?” said Voltaire’s peacock. “Certainly I have: look at my tail.”

Lady Joan would have said, “Certainly I have: look at my card-basket and my bargains.”

“You were very stupid to-night, Io,” she said roughly when the Dean and his lady were fairly away, and Ioris remained alone with her, with the lamps burning low. “You were very stupid to-night,” she said, giving a twist to the silver-gilt spilla in her coiled hair.

“I have a headache, *carissima mia*.”

Lady Joan looked dubiously at him.

“You’re always having headaches now.”

“And you do not pity me?”

“I wish you wouldn’t always have ’em just when *my* friends dine here,” she said ungraciously. “You’re always well enough when that woman’s here.”

“What woman?”

“As if you didn’t know! You’re twice as civil to her as you need be. Marjory’s noticed it, I can tell you. Oh, don’t look so innocent. You’re always after Etoile. You know you are.”

“*Mais, ma chère!* You always see me courteous, I hope, to all your sex.”

“All my fiddlesticks! Courteous indeed! You’re much more than courteous—talking to her all night, going away when she goes away, sitting staring at her as if she were something new-fallen from heaven.”

"*Mais, ma chère !* What exaggeration ! I told you the first night we saw her that she did not even please me ; that she was insolent, and was cold—she is lost in her art—she does not perceive that such mere mortals as myself exist."

"You try to show her you exist, at any rate. Marjory saw you walking with her this very day in the Colonna gardens."

"*La bonne* Marjory must want to make mischief. I came up from calling on Marc' Antonio by the gardens to make a short cut, and she was there—it was the purest accident."

"Humph !" Lady Joan was a woman of experience, and did not believe in accidents between men and women.

"Do not let us quarrel about nothing," he said, rousing himself and altering the twist of the gilded spilla. "She is no woman to me. If I look at her at all it is merely as one would look at old Grillparzer at Vienna, or Wagner at Baireuth—for the sake of what she has done. When a woman has entered a public arena she is half-unsexed. You know what I think of notoriety for your sex."

His heart smote him as he spoke, as though he uttered a blasphemy against the saints of his childish faith. But he did speak with an admirable carelessness and contempt combined which carried conviction to his hearer's ear.

Lady Joan liked to be persuaded that she had voluntarily abstained from being a celebrity, as Richelieu liked to be persuaded that he had voluntarily abstained from being a poet. Besides, she was always easily lulled into complacent serenity. A very vain woman is easily deceived, because it seems impossible to her that any one can ever be preferred to herself.

He played with the spilla in her hair and leaned over her in the mellow lamplight. She looked up into his amorous eyes, and was content ; the lustre in them was dim to what she had once seen there, and the fire spent, yet he knew how to make their dreamy depths tell the tale she had heard ten thousand times and never tired of ; it was only acting now, but it was acting so perfect that she lived its dupe in happy blindness. Keen, and shrewd, and hard of temper though she was, here she was duped as utterly as the softest and silliest of her sex.

Though very clever in many ways, one thing in her was stronger than her cleverness, and that was vanity.

A very trustful woman believes in her lover's fidelity with her heart ; a very vain woman believes in it with her head.

To Lady Joan it would have seemed more possible for the stars to fall from the sky than for any man to desert her.

In passion for him she was as reasonless and as sightless as any Juliet or Gretchen lying for the first moment in her lover's arms. The years had blown low the flame in him, but in her they had only fanned it to a fiercer strength. The ridicule of

him, the command of him, the oppression and the tyranny and the suspicion of him, were only her way of showing power, only her device for making her world believe the thing she wished. Alone with him, love intoxicated, drugged, subdued her; alone with him, she was only an eager, passionate, voluptuous mistress; alone with him, she was only Cleopatra—the Dame du Comptoir was dead.

Ioris was in everything the superior of his tyrant.

In intelligence, in taste, in culture, in disposition he was alike far beyond her. Yet, by a coarse, rough energy which swept before it his hesitating temperament, and by a sensual, fierce passion which his soft nature recoiled from conflict with, she had obtained a dominion over him which he had ceased even to think of contesting. The women who love men truly never obtain this power: they love too well to watch the occasion to seize it. The old proverb that, between two, one is always booted and spurred, the other always saddled and bridled, is as true as proverbs always are, which are “the distilled drops of the experience of nations.” It is not superiority of mind, or of character, or of person that determines which shall ride and which shall be ridden; it is generally rather the result of a certain hardness of temper which determines the question early in the day and never loses the supremacy. Taken roughly it may be safely predicted that it will always be the higher nature which will submit. Often it is the jade that rules the hero, the fool that has feet kissed by the genius.

The very fierceness and force and fire of this woman, which had at first intoxicated him, served now at once to repel and to intimidate him.

From the stern eyes, from the imperious voice, from the vigorous gestures, from the resolute will that had once fascinated him by their sheer strength which swept his softer nature away on it as a mountain torrent sweeps a tree, he had little by little grown to recoil in the inevitable reaction of all purely animal passion. Her heel was set on his throat. Once he had kissed the foot that so degraded him. But little by little he had begun to breathe labouredly under its oppression. Little by little the desire to raise it and rise had come to him. He was tired of his life.

Tired of the orders and counter-orders, of the buying and selling, of the petty hypocrisies, of the puerile aims, of the exactions that compelled him to follow like her shadow her path through society, of the obligation to show himself wheresoever she might choose to go in that continual attendance which is a rapture when voluntary from passion, a deathly fatigue when imposed from habit—he was like a prisoner who drags a cannon-ball at his ankle.

Night after night, as he dressed to go through the social comedy whose every speech and gesture he knew beforehand, he sighed impatient to be free; and yet he went. Habit is an ever lengthening chain, whose links get heavier with each added ring.

With her their love was still alive, an ever-burning fire, irresistible and insatiable in its hours of abandonment. With him their love was dead, and was replaced by habit.

It is a terrible difference.

Letting himself out of her house in the cold rosy dawn he shuddered, not with the physical chill of the wintry night, but at the vision of his own future.

"This woman always!"

So he thought every morning, yet every night he went back to her, as the mill-horse to its yoke. She was not faithful to him, because such women as she know not fidelity. She was not truthful to him, because truth was not in her and could not find its home in her mouth. She was the ruin of his life, whilst she declared herself his salvation. Her tyranny, her exactions, her ridicule, and her overwhelming egotism cast into the cold shade of men's scorn the man whom she delighted to oppress and wound, as a child loves to hurt the pet that it hugs to its bosom. His idiosyncrasies were lost under her inordinate vanities, and her obtrusive personalities drove him to the refuge of silence and self-repression. He passed his life like a tree under the shadow of a high wall: only the wall had been built up brick and brick, so that he had never noticed it till it was for ever there between him and the sun.

She herself was in love still—with that terrible and untiring passion which can exist in a woman who to masculine vigour unites feminine caprice.

She delighted to make him subservient, to render him absurd, to deny him any will of his own, to ridicule his words, to mock at him before the world. But this was the result only of her natural temper. It was only as she beat a dog, or punished a child, or tyrannised over whatever lay at her mercy. Besides, she thought that it imposed on her society; she thought that it veiled her own passion for him, which was strong and fierce and keen; which begrudged a glance or a smile from him elsewhere; which took a voluptuous delight in his person, in his touch. But in his presence, in his regard, in his caress, there was still intoxication for her; she would have seen him dead sooner than given to another; her passion was violent, faithless, cruel, ignoble, but it was passion, and it was living still; a restless sea of fire that beat itself upon the cold ashes of his own dead desires till it warmed them to a semblance of itself.

Once he had felt as tiger-tamers feel, and the very danger

that there was in the creature he caressed had served to enthral him. Little by little the reality of the tigress temper had become visible to him, and its greed and hardness and predatory instincts were revealed. This queen of the desert that laid her soft cheek against his was, after all, only a cat that growled. Little by little the sense stole on him that his arms held what preyed on him—and would devour him.

But when he awoke to his own peril it was too late—the tamed tigress had sprung and mastered him.

CHAPTER XIX.

CLEOPATRA after sunset, the Lady Joan rose nevertheless every morning Dame du Comptoir to the tips of her fingers. Eventide might be for the mandoline or the mask, and the tender passions and the fierce ones, but noonday was none the less for business.

Her forenoons were sternly given to those commercial considerations for which she had brought a leaning from the banks of Abana and Pharphar, Orontes and Euphrates. Telegrams and letters about her various speculations and gigantic commercial transactions scarcely let her swallow her breakfast in comfort; and these attended to, there were the teacups and triptychs, the pots and the pans of her excellent friends and brothers Mimo and Trillo; china to be packed, canvases to be backed, and all the minutiae to be attended to of that sublime mission of the diffusion of Art which she had set herself as her object in life, only secondary to the Berkshire pigs and the Brahma poultry, and the general salvation of Fiordelisa.

Mimo and Trillo were the very Dioscouri of Art; twin Tyn-darids of connoisseurship and commerce; Gemini of genius who were both unspeakably dear to her; though plump Mimo bore off the palm as far as being petted by her went, and was by far the most enthusiastic in her praises. According to him she was angelic, heroic, unequalled, far above all the mortal weaknesses of her sex, and only possessing one little, little, little fault—that of being so unnaturally and superhumanly perfect that she was incapable of conceiving that a base-minded world could ever put incorrect constructions on her noble actions.

“Poverina! Certainly she compromises herself; alas! she does compromise herself; but it is only the boldness of innocence!” said Mimo, with a bit of cracked Limoges in his hand and a big cigar in his mouth.

"It was the boldness of innocence." It cost the good fellow no more to say so than it did to say that any one of his round plates, painted and baked by a living workman in a cellar in the Trastevere, was pure Gubbio ware, with the iridescent hues coloured by Maestro Giorgio himself.

"It was the boldness of innocence."

The phrase tickled the fancy of Mimo very much, and was for ever ready on his tongue, as "*Antico—proprio antico!*" was for ever on it before any doubtful plaque of *repoussé* work or any *quattrocentista* bridal coffer that had been carved and gilded the week before. "It was the boldness of innocence." After all, if the phrase pleased her so much, it cost him very little to say it; and what mortal man would not learn it by heart, when, just for saying it, you get a cosy sofa to lounge in, and a nice little dinner to eat, and a handsome woman to pet you?

Besides, "the boldness of innocence" is like the reputation for oddity—once accorded, it is as elastic as indiarubber and as comprehensive as the umbrellas of the kings of the East, which would shelter three hundred men. There is nothing you cannot explain away with it; before it Juvenal himself would be obliged to make his bow and retire quite satisfied.

Trillo was somewhat more austere, and had not the comfortable roundness as of a child's tumbler or an Indian god which characterised Mimo; he was also more astute, and could never be brought to rhapsodise as Mimo would do over the Berkshire pigs and the Minerva who had imported them. Trillo went in for high art; found marvellous Raffaelles and Luca della Robbias in old cellars and old walls; and though occasionally to oblige he would condescend to furniture, he would never run about and find old chairs for you, as Mimo would do any day of his life. Trillo had only a studio, and never had anything else, whereas Mimo, if you were buying a good deal of him, did not so much mind your calling his chambers a shop. But this unbending austerity of Trillo made him, perhaps, the more useful of the two in the main. Trillo even impressed the great Hebrides family, and found them a stove painted by Hirschvögel when that master stayed and worked in Venice, and an altar-screen in ivory carved by Desidirio, before which all South Kensington subsequently went on its knees. He had been, indeed, so fortunate as to find these exact works of art three years before for Prince Kouramasine, who had borne them off to his castle in White Russia; but White Russia and Ben Nevis are far-sundered; and the designs were so beautiful that it was not extraordinary that both Hirschvögel and Desidirio should have been so enamoured of them as to have executed them twice.

Both Mimo and Trillo, who were men of judgment, suffered many things from the ignorance of their Minerva. She would

confuse styles and orders, jumble up schools and epochs, call Turin Arazzi Gobelin, and Frankenthal china Worcester; attribute a Dutch ivory to Alessandro Algardi, and a post-Renaissance painting to Spinello or Francia; and they would shiver when these mistakes were made before folks that knew, and would groan together in secret.

But these were trifles after all; there were so very few folks that knew; and their Minerva was invaluable to them, and they sat at her feet solemn as the owl of her emblem, whenever the great Scotch cousins came with her, or the much-enduring British tourist was brought in her train. Indeed, in one sense her ignorance was advantageous: it looked so frank.

Indeed, her very blunders became useful.

Trillo would pull his beard and sigh that the dear and noble lady had such wonderful natural intelligence that she had never been brought to correct it by study. She had too much good faith too: she fell a prey to designing persons; and Trillo pulled his beard, and sighed again, and confessed that a good deal the dear and noble lady had in her house was *robaccia*—all sheer *robaccia*! She had been imposed on; she was always imposed on when he and Mimo were not by; she had a few real gems—yes, a few real gems—Mimo and he had secured them for her; but as for the rest——! Now, mutual admiration societies answer well; but mutual depreciation societies answer, perhaps, still better. The former is a gilded screen that may soon fall to pieces; but the latter is an impenetrable haze, such as hid Jove from mortal eyes profane.

The tried partnership between the Temple of All the Virtues, and Mimo and Trillo had never been signed or sealed—nay, never even been whispered—but it served its purpose admirably.

When people took tea and a muffin in the Temple, they did not see the fine wires connecting it with the shop and the studio; and when they went to the shop and the studio they did not discern the metaphorical telephone by which shop and studio took counsel with the Temple. But nevertheless the impalpable lines were there; and Mimo and Trillo, who were the Owl and the Ægis of Minerva, naturally absorbed much of Minerva's attention, especially when there came any mighty cousin wanting teacups and triptychs, or an Æsthetic Dean or a Ritualistic Rector with a pretty taste in the way of carved choir-seats or ornamented vestments.

So that in one way or another she was always very busy.

That practical half of her temperament which Voightel had called the *dame du comptoir* was filled with a multiplicity of objects and interests, from new people to conciliate to old china to sell, from bargains to be disposed of to balls to get invited to, from companies to be floated to visiting cards to be left; and

this harassing and multitudinous minutiae of interests so absorbed her at times that she actually forgot to watch Ioris, and left him a certain slender enjoyment of personal liberty of which he was quick to avail himself to the utmost.

Prudence at times required that she should call on people with no escort but Mr. Challoner's; business at times required that she should rummage amidst old lumber shops with Burette as her guardian and guide; her own pleasure at times required that she should disport herself at theatres or in Campagna rides with Douglas Graeme or young Guido Serravalle. Occasionally, too, there would pass through Rome some old friends of the camping-out days of the Desert, of whom it was not judicious to allow Ioris to see too much, since Ioris had queer fancies, and amongst them was one that she had been a stranger to Eros and Anteros till he met her. Men will have these notions—pure vanity, no doubt—but it is never worth while to disturb them.

So thus—here and there—he gained his morning or evening of freedom; and whenever such a release came to him he hesitated never now as to how he should spend it, but wended his way to the old house by the Rospigliosi garden and made friends with Tsar, and sat in the dreamy fragrance of Etoile's narcissi and winter-roses.

Very clever as both the Lady Joan and Marjory Scrope were in their several manners, and experienced as the latter certainly was in masculine ways and wiles, to neither of them did it occur to remember, in their observations of Ioris, two things.

First, that human nature yearns for freedom.

Secondly, that human nature has a tendency towards that which is forbidden.

When they set themselves in their several modes to watch him, and were convinced that they succeeded in learning all his actions, they never took into account that men are like school-children, and cannot by any amount of spying be hindered from wholly following their bent, and will only be driven into devices for concealing it.

The real temper of Ioris, the amorous but reticent, impassioned yet impassive temperament of his nationality had been long lost sight of under the dulling influence of a galling routine. The semi-conjugal character of his position in the Casa Challoner and at Fiordelisa had long taken all savour of intrigue out of it; was impossible to cheat himself into thinking he was climbing an *escalier dérobé* when Mr. Challoner welcomed him so blandly up the grand staircase; his life had long lost the supreme charm of life: it had lost all possibility of the unforeseen arriving in it. Rising in the morning he knew all the routine of the coming twenty-four hours as well as he knew the

numerals on the clock's face which would tell them as they passed.

In her intense eagerness to absorb him completely, she had overshot her mark; she had washed out of his life all expectation and all desire. She had made it a mere sand-plain, monotonous and arid, with her own figure looming perpetually in mirage on its horizon, till turn where he would he could see nothing else.

When the charm of a new interest, the mystery of a character he did not comprehend, the attraction of a woman unlike any that he had ever known—when all these fell in his path he gave way to the impulse that moved him to pursue them, with hardly more thought at first than a child has as it runs down a by-path to see nearer a butterfly on the wing.

"*Vous l'avez voulu!*" he would have said to the woman who had sought to blind his eyes and bind his fancies. She had done it herself: the slave's life into which she had enchained him had made the slave's instincts awake in him: the instincts to hide and to escape.

He had fallen into an utterly cheerless routine of existence, to which he was only reconciled by the sort of ferocious seduction that she still possessed for him; but when the eyes of Etoile first met his they had awakened the dormant romance and the forgotten dreams of his youth.

It became sweet to him to have thoughts that his tyrant could not divine, sympathies that she could not reach, happy hours that she could not mar; and at first he merely concealed the frequency of his visits to Etoile as he concealed every better emotion that he felt from his mistress. As it was she never suspected them.

In the forenoons that she gave to Mimo and Trillo, and to business generally, she seldom ordered or expected his attendance, and most of those forenoons found him by Etoile's hearth, sitting in the fragrance of her heliotropes and hyacinths. When Lady Joan questioned him as to his morning he would say he had been at the Court or the Vatican, at the studios or the stables, and she was content.

To Ioris, who had much of the artist and something of the poet, and who might say, like Camors of his imagination, "*J'en ai, mais je l'étouffe,*" there was a pure and fresh pleasure in roaming over Rome with Etoile.

Accustomed for years to a woman who ransacked all art only to get something to buy cheap and sell dear, and who regarded a picture or a bust only with an eye as to what it would fetch in ten years' time, he found a new delight in the culture and fancy of a woman to whom every stone had a story and every statue was a living friend. When he went with Etoile and stood

before the Faun of the Capitol he saw that she grew very pale and was quite silent.

"What do you feel?" he asked her.

After a little while she answered him what she did feel and what with her was truth.

"I can hardly tell you. I have thought of all these marbles so long that really to see them seems stranger than a dream. The Faun is the very incarnation of the youth of the world. Three thousand years have passed since he was called to shape, and he smiles as if he had been called out from the white rock but yesterday. Yet so many creeds have changed, and so many empires fallen, and so many cities perished since he saw the light!—the Apollo again, he should not be the god of any art, for all art changes; he is the god of nature, the god eternal, the god of the flowers that grew out of Cæsar's ashes and the sea that smiles though it drowned Shelley, and the sun that shines on while nations perish——"

Ioris, standing by her, thought of another woman who, coming there for the first time also, had made a wry face at the Apollo and snapped her fingers at him, and called this glory of the Belvedere a moonstruck posture-master, and this Faun of the Capitol a jolly little rogue, but had said she never could see what anybody found in stone dolls to rave about. He had dwelt with the lower and coarser intelligence till he had got used to it, but it had never altogether ceased to jar on him. The finer and more spiritual impulses in him revived and sprung up eagerly to meet the purer atmosphere of Etoile's fancies as pressed-down reeds spring up to meet the breeze.

Meditation and fancy were with her the very sap of life, pervading her from root to branch, as its sap a tree; with him they were but the upmost crown of leaf that fluttered in the wind, and was put forth, or frozen back, according to the air around. Yet there was likeness enough in them to give sympathy, and whilst he was with her he thought and saw and spoke as she did—and was true in it.

He also met Etoile at one or two great houses, embassies, and palaces, where the Lady Joan did not penetrate, and where she permitted him to go, because she always hoped, some day or other, to squeeze herself in by his means.

When his tyrant was near, her boisterous self-assertion completely subdued him; her incessant watchfulness made him constrained; and, annoyed by her persistent claims on his attention, yet afraid to resist them, he had grown into the habit of a silent self-effacement in sheer self-defence.

Away from her he was transformed, and all the grace, talent, and social gifts natural to him had their play. Nature had bestowed on him a graceful and dignified presence, a face that

attracted the eyes of all women, and that happy tact and charm of manner which in society outweigh all accomplishment and achievement.

He would have looked well in a panel of Giorgione's or a canvas of Vandyck's, and his grace and bearing went fittingly with these grave old palaces of Rome, where the motley of modern society almost gathers the grace of a dead day by the spell of its surroundings, in the solemn beauty of galleries that Raffaele painted, and the gorgeous vastness of halls that Michael Angelo built.

Etoile had looked at him at first as she would have done at a portrait or a statue; then the portrait smiled, the statue spoke; he lingered beside her in those noble galleries, where the genius of the past gazed down on the frivolity of the present; when she was occupied by others he stood near, mute and listening; when he was there he was her shadow; when he was not there she missed him.

Etoile, from the years when she had pored over Shakspeare, and Racine, and Goethe in the woodland shadows of her tranquil Ardennes, had had no passion save for her art; though it was not likely that the world in general was going to be so simple as to believe this. It is seldom that the world is simple enough to receive a truth. "I am Truth, and have few acquaintances," says the gentleman in Congreve's comedy: when he comes in, most people look the other way.

Etoile in every fibre of her mind and temper was an artist. The artist quite absorbed and extinguished the woman in her. Men thought her—because they found her—cold. They paid her court and wooed her in all kinds of ways, but they all left her unmoved.

Sometimes she would watch two lovers gliding under moonlit trees, or look at a woman with a young child in her arms, and wish that this warmth of human love would touch her. But it did not.

She had many who wooed her, but none who moved her. Sometimes it seemed to her that she was like a high-strung instrument, that echoes all the emotions of the soul but remains itself insensible to them.

She led a life of much isolation by choice, and of much retirement by preference. She considered that to be great the artist must be much alone with himself and with nature, and the leisure she had was given to the arts. When she went into the world it amused her for half an hour; then it grew tedious. She liked better her library, her atelier, her solitude; or the open air, where every breath that blew took her in fancy to the woods and waters of her happy childhood.

"You are an innocent woman, you are a famous woman, but

you are not a happy woman," said a great wise man to her once.

"No? I suppose there is always something missing," she answered him.

Meanwhile the world in general knew that she was famous, thought that she was happy, but did not in the least believe her innocent.

To Ioris, as to the world, it seemed strange to find a woman who was still young, and had some place in the great world, passing her time in study and in thought. To come in with the early morning to her, and see her, with old chronicles and crabbed manuscripts, following the threads of disputed histories or gathering the thoughts of forgotten pasts, had a charm for him. In his youth he had been a student too, and to meet her in her own field he shook off him that worldly levity, and that lower habit of thought which had obscured and absorbed his mind in his later years. It attracted yet it tantalised him to find her pure intellectual abstractions absorb her, whilst the daily pleasures of other women's lives scarce held her for a second. He felt that to make this woman know a human passion would be to draw her down to earth, and break her skyward-bearing wings, and yet he desired to do it—daily desired more and more.

As with him so with a chamois hunter, who, seeing a mountain hawk sailing far, far away in the clear rarefied air above the cloud, lifts his rifle, and sends death through the blue serene sacred peace of the still heavens.

The bird drops into a deep abyss where no eyes see its dying agony. It is out of reach, and if reached were of no use to him who shot it, since he only seeks the chamois of the hills that gives him food and shoe-leather. And yet he fires.

And the bird is dead.

Something of the hunter's feeling woke in him now. She was so far away and so content in that high air where nothing mortal followed. He wanted to bring her down and handle her closer, and feel if her heart beat—make it beat, indeed, by pain, if only pain would do it. Not from cruelty—oh, no. He was never cruel to the lowliest thing that moved. Only from vague curiosity, and a baffled wonder, and an awakening desire; and that eagerness for what is rare and strange, which is as eager in the man with his loves as in the child with his pastimes.

So he came to her constantly in the long mornings of the winter, when the sun grew warm at noon; and went to houses where he could meet her, when he could secure an hour's freedom; and studied her, and grew a little more familiar with her day by day, and learned the details of her life, and told her stories of his own, and gave her that delicate, half-uttered, all-cloquent

sympathy which his tact, perhaps, rather than his heart taught him at first; and at times would sit quite silent gazing at her with that mystical, voluptuous, contemplative light in his dreamy gaze which Love has given to the southern and the eastern alone of the sons of men, and which will draw a woman towards it as the sun draws up the dew.

Meanwhile the one who believed she held the key of his thoughts, knew nothing of the truth.

So long as he was always close at hand, to be shown off as a slave, so long as he consented to follow her about and be made absurd at her pleasure; so long as he bought and sold, and fetched and carried for her, and she could call on to aloud to all the four winds of heaven wheresoever she went, with the display and vanity that were so sweet to her, so long the Lady Joan was not a woman to notice a stifled sigh, a laggard step, a look of weariness, a gesture of reluctance. These are the signs that women who love well, read, trembling, and in themselves droop by, as the field-born pimpernel droops by the darker passing of a summer rain-cloud. But she was not one of these. Her vanity bore her buoyant against all perception of such changes. He was her servant, her worshipper, her lover, her plaything—what more could he want of heaven or of earth?

So long as she enchained his person it never occurred to her that his mind, and his heart, and his soul might be elsewhere.

Now and then a thrill of savage jealousy ran through her, wakened by some word of Marjory Scrope's or some sight of Etoile; but it was soon lulled by a careless laugh or a contemptuous denial from Ioris.

She was duped where a less vain and less arrogant temper would have been instantly alarmed.

Meanwhile oppression had its usual result, and produced as its fruit deception.

Ioris was of a frank and tender nature, but he had lived much amongst women, and they had made him false.

The untruthfulness of women communicates itself to the man whose chief society they form, and the perpetual necessities of intrigue end in corrupting the temper whose chief pursuit is passion.

Women who environ a man's fidelity by ceaseless suspicion, and exaction, create the evil that they dread.

Ioris deceived this woman at first in trifles, later on in graver things, because she ruthlessly demanded from him an amount of time and a surrender of will which no man will ever give without becoming either openly or secretly a rebel. She had made him fear her, so he betrayed her. In love, as in a kingdom, the tyrant sits upon a hollow throne.

But she was one of those to whom "an immense Me was the

measure of the Universe;" and this "immense Me" obscured a sight otherwise sharp as the hawk's and clear as the pigeon's.

Meantime Ioris once more rose to the light of the day with the sense that the day might bring some charm he was not sure of, some interest he would not exhaust. Once more the delight of the uncertain had come to him, playing fitfully about his path; and once more the sound of the lutes in the moonlight, the sheen of the stars above the palms and laurels, seemed in unison with his fancies, because, once more, he felt young. He did not reason about it, because he was a man who never reasoned when he could avoid doing so, and who always shut his eyelids as long as he could to what was inconvenient or painful. But he resigned himself with few struggles to the fresh influences that stole on him, and never asked himself when they would leave him.

His mistress had been right when she had said that there was something of the Faust and something of the Romeo in him, but there was still more of the Hamlet. He would bear the ills he had, for fear of others that he knew not of, and would question himself at times—

"Am I a coward?
 It cannot be
 But I am pigeon-livered, and lack gall
 To make oppression bitter."

ii

The delicate, fanciful reasoning, the vacillation of thought which produced infirmity of purpose, the wounded pride which took refuge in silence, the complexity of impulses which baffled at unravelling them both friend and foe, the armour of jest, the inner core of sadness, had all of them the Hamlet cast. Like Hamlet he could smile upon his foe; like Hamlet he could make mock of his own dishonour; like Hamlet, he was destined to say of the deepest passion of his life, "You should not have believed me; I loved you not,"—and love the more all the while he said it.

CHAPTER XX.

"How ridiculous it is that *she* should go to such places!" said the Lady Joan a day or two later, with wrath and scorn, as she ate her breakfast, flinging away a local journal which recorded the name of Etoile in the list of guests at a Russian Grand Duchess's party.

"Why ridiculous?" said Ioris between his teeth, without looking up. His face grew darker as he stooped and picked up the paper.

"Why?" screamed the Lady Joan. "*Why?* It is worse than ridiculous! It is disgusting!"

"Why?" said Ioris very coldly.

The Lady Joan burst out laughing.

"Good heavens, Io! Where have you lived? You who used to know Paris like a book; you who pretend to know the world!"

"I do not understand," said her lover still coldly.

"Oh, don't you! I should think you might well enough, though you never can see half an inch before your nose! Look what a life she's led!"

"Perfectly innocent? That is rare. But is it forbidden, objectionable?"

The Lady Joan shrieked with fresh laughter.

"Innocent? You're innocent! Why, only listen to anybody talking about her for ten minutes, and you'll hear enough to set your very hair on end. You never went to 'em I suppose; but her Sunday evenings in Paris were!—that I do know for a fact. Even respectable *men* wouldn't go."

Ioris laughed a little slightly.

"I have never met any one of my sex so very virtuous. I suppose those very virtuous men belong to your country. But, *ma chère*, since you know such things of her, why receive her?"

"It was that old beast Voightel."

"Surely it was your father?"

"Oh, Lord, no! She hardly knew papa. At least, yes, of course, she did know him, but he only went to her now and then."

"Where the respectable men would not go. Poor Lord Archie!"

The Lady Joan coloured and grew angry.

"You know very well what I mean; poor dear papa never is

as particular as he ought to be." (Ioris thought of Lord Archie lying smoking under the cherry-trees of Fiordelisa, and mentally agreed that he was not.) "And she charms men, and all that kind of thing; improper women always do," continued the Lady Joan, who was so used to putting on her ruff of decorum that she would put it on sometimes even with those who had ruffled it the most. "The life of Etoile has been infamous, altogether infamous. I know so many people who know all about her, and of course since we became acquainted with her, I've naturally inquired more. If I had known all I do now, of course I never would have let her set her foot in my door."

"It is a very beautiful foot," said Ioris, who felt a great anger in him that he dared not display, and could not altogether smother; and, either by accident or design, his eyes glanced at the foot of the Lady Joan, visible from the shortness of her skirt, in the large stout boot which tramped over his ploughed fields and in and out so many studios, and up and down so many stairs of the Bona Dea's temples. The glance and the words filled up the measure of her fury—a fury she smothered as he did his anger, for these two people, whilst living in the closest intimacy, almost habitually deceived one another. She flung herself round to a bureau, and took out a letter and threw it to him.

"There, read that, since you don't believe *me*!"

Ioris read; his eyebrows drew together a little, but otherwise his face did not change. He read it calmly through, then gave it back to her.

"Conclusive—if true."

It was a letter from a man who did ill in art what Etoile did supremely well; a man who had hungered after her successes with envious greed for many a year; a man, moreover, who had endeavoured to pay court to her and had failed. To him, knowing him well, the Lady Joan had written a careless question or two about Etoile: in answer he had poured out—exaggerated—all that calumny had ever invented of her. Lady Joan had relied on the almost certain fact that when a man's or woman's nature is not noble, it will be very petty indeed; there is but little middle way betwixt the two.

"Conclusive, if true," said Ioris carelessly, and handed her the sheet. "But why should we quarrel about her? She is nothing to us: and she is here to-day and will be gone to-morrow."

His heart was beating with anger and impatience, and a certain sickness of doubt was stealing upon him, and with it also a better impulse of chivalrous championship of the wronged and absent woman. But habit was stronger with him than any of these feelings, and it was his habit constantly to conceal all his real thoughts from his inquisitor. The screw never brings forth but a galled lie.

"If true!" echoed the Lady Joan a little more satisfied, locking up her letter. "There's no 'if' about it. Anybody who knows her will tell you the same thing. It was disgraceful of my father to send her to *me*; but Voightel can always turn him round his finger, and Voightel's a beast."

Ioris remained silent; he had heard Voightel rhapsodised over in the Casa Challoner with the most fervent worship as the most learned, most distinguished, most marvellous of men, and once, when he had been expected there, though he had not arrived, had seen the driest of wines, the choicest of pipes, the sweetest of words got ready to salute his arrival.

At the instant Mr. Challoner entered.

"We were talking of Etoile, Robert," said his wife "Aren't you disgusted with that brute Voightel, persuading my father to send her to *me*?"

Mr. Challoner was used to catching quickly a clue.

"It was certainly ill-advised," he said in his best and most wooden manner. "One cannot be too careful, and there are very odd stories——"

The Lady Joan felt that there were moments in which Mr. Challoner was priceless.

"So I was saying to Io," she answered him. "Her life in Paris was always very queer, wasn't it?"

"And you are always over-indulgent and hasty," said Mr. Challoner, with the paternal manner which now and then he assumed with much effect. "Yes; yes. Of course it would have been better not to have known her, but when we go to the country the acquaintance will die a natural death, and if she be here another winter we need not resume it. Here is a telegram from Sicily, Ioris."

Telegrams from Sicily were always flying in at the Casa Challoner.

In gratitude to Free Italy for the agreeable refuge she gave them, and the many teacups and triptychs she let them pick up, Mr. Challoner and his wife (or rather his wife and Mr. Challoner) had determined on creating for her a tubular bridge.

The bridge was to go over the Straits of Messina, by the Gulf of Faro, and connect Sicily with the mainland, and do away with brigandage and barbarism for ever and aye. There was very little of it made as yet, except upon paper; nothing, indeed, except some piles that had been driven in on the shore by Scylla; but the prospectus had been out, and the shares all sold for four years past, and a Scotch duke was the nominal head of it, and a great many clerks and contractors were fussing and fuming over it alike in Calabria and Cannon Street, and money was turning about it in the churn of the Exchanges and Chambers of Commerce.

"My bridge," the Lady Joan called it, with a fine wholesale appropriation—as she said "my farm" when talking of Fior-delisa.

She thought herself a great woman of business. The age of Money, of Concessions, of Capitalists, and of Limited Liabilities, has largely produced the female financier, who thinks, with M. de Camors, that "*l'humanité est composée des actionnaires.*" Other centuries have had their especial type of womanhood: the learned and graceful *hetaira*, the saintly and ascetic recluse, the warrior of Oriflamme or Red Rose, the *dame de beauté*, all loveliness and light, like a dew-drop; the philosophic *précieuse*, with sesquipedalian phrase; the revolutionist, half nude of body and wholly nude of mind—each in her turn has given her sign and seal to her especial century, for better or for worse. The nineteenth century has some touch of all, but its own novelty of production is the female speculator.

The woman who, breathless, watches *la hausse* and *la baisse*; whose favour can only be won by some hint in advance of the newspapers; whose heart is locked to all save golden keys; who starts banks, who concocts companies, who keeps a broker as in the eighteenth century a woman kept a moukey, and in the twelfth a knight; whose especial art is to buy in at the right moments, and to sell out in the nick of time; who is great in railways and canals, and new bathing-places, and shares in fashionable streets; who chooses her lovers thinking of concessions, and kisses her friends for sake of the secrets they may betray from their husbands;—what other centuries may say of her who can tell?

The Hôtel Rambouillet thought itself higher than heaven, and the generation of Catherine of Sienna believed her deal planks the sole highway to the throne of God.

But the present age is blessed with the female financier, and must make the best of her, as it must of the rotten railways, the bubble banks, the choked-up mines, the sand-filled canals, the solitudes of brick and mortar, which it owes to her genius.

Lady Joan believed herself to be one of these modern blessings. For those who would listen to her she had always miracles to tell of firms she saved and concessions she obtained, of ministers' graces won by her smile, and monarchs' signatures obtained by her intercession. According to herself, there was scarce a steamer that floated or banker that prospered, or traction-engine that ran, or new street that was traced out, from the Thames to the Nile, from the Danube to the Tigris, that did not owe something to her procreative or protecting powers. She described herself as a kind of ambulatory Lamp of Aladdin, and if you only rubbed her up (the right way) she would make a palace spring up for you like a mushroom. How much of this

was true, and how much imagination, was perhaps one of those things that no man will ever know—like the real thoughts of Lord Beaconsfield, or the real use of the secret service money in England, or the real discoveries of the Black Cabinet under Persigny. It was an Eleusinian mystery.

Profane persons were apt to consider that her ability for commerce was chiefly exercised in buying pots and pans and chairs and tables, in old shops, in old highways and byways wherever she went, north, south, east, or west. But this was ill-nature. She really had a talent for getting up companies, and persuading people to take shares in them, and was very fond of running up the back-stairs of politics, and coming down them with the pot-luck of a ministerial concession or of a royal subsidy, picked up from the seething stew-pan of international jobberies.

Her lovers devoutly believed in her as a woman of business. It was not an attribute that attracted, but it was one that awed them. "Damn it, madam, who falls in love with attributes?" says Berkeley. Probably no one. But the chain once fastened, certain attributes may serve to rivet it, especially when they are fear-compelling.

In his soul Ioris detested these South Sea Bubbles that his mistress was so fond of blowing. It is not engaging to see the Bourse quotations seized as eagerly as your love-notes could be, or to have a tender silence broken by a sudden recollection that Macmaw and Filljaw's telegram at once must be answered.

But, though it revolted him it served to entangle him. His name was of use to her; she taught him how to obtain concessions, and knew herself how to work them when got; his influence was of use to her; his title sparkled on the Messina Bridge prospectus before the Board in Cannon Street, and enabled her to say in England that she had all Italy at her beck and call, as in Italy she said that she had all England. She was a woman of resources and of foresight; gradually she drew all his affairs into her hands, and made him drift at her will hither and thither; she got him into the habit of being guided by her, and habit has much weight on a southern temper; she thrust through her amorous butterfly the honey-laden pin of commerce, and fastened down the wings that, without it, would have borne him to fresher flowers.

Besides, Finance served her well in other ways than this; if Paris and Menelaüs had gone together to build a bridge or dig a canal, they could never afterwards, for very ridicule's sake, have called up Greece to arms.

"They've gone to Calabria together to see about my bridge!" she would say to Mrs. Grundy at five o'clock tea. "Such a bore, isn't it? I'm quite dull without them. But it will be a

grand thing for Italy when it is done; so one must not mind trouble."

"They" was her pet pronoun, her horse of battle, her choice piece of prudence, and Mrs. Grundy would go away and say to Mrs. Candour, "He's only with her so much because they're making a tubular bridge by the Gulf of Faro. The Duke of Oban is president of it; a great deal of English money is put into it. Fine idea, very. Her idea originally, I believe. Oh! what a cruel backbiting world we live in, my dear!"

Meanwhile, until "they" came back from Calabria, Lady Joan petted good-looking Douglas Græme, or handsome Eccellino da Sestri, or Guido Serravalle with his guitar, or anybody else that came handy, and had cosy little dinners with plump Mimo in the corner, and tuneful Guido to sing to her, and enjoyed herself exceedingly, and wrote to Ioris word every day that she was wretched.

This winter morning, however, the telegram brought no call to Calabria, and she had planned to spend it at Fiordelisa. Mr. Challoner—the telegram disposed of—proceeded to tell her that it was ten o'clock, and the ponies were standing at the door.

The morning was still very cold; snow was still upon all the hills, a fierce wind was blowing boisterously down the face of the river; it was not attractive weather for the country. Ioris sighed uneasily as he took up all her shawls, and went downstairs, to be driven by her across the Campagna in the teeth of the Alpine blasts.

Mr. Challoner stood in the window upstairs, and watched their departure with the nearest approach to a smile that ever appeared upon his countenance. Then he went into his own little sanctum, stirred up his fire, sat down in his most comfortable chair, and began to read his French and English papers. He felt that this morning at least he had the better part.

"He's a very useful fellow to me," Mr. Challoner had said in an unguarded moment once, over some sherry, to old Lord George Stair, who had mumbled a vague assent, and had thought, amongst other wicked things he had read in his far-away youth, of Diderot's song of *Six Sous* that Grimm quotes in his *Memoirs*.

Meantime, while Mr. Challoner enjoyed his *Pall Mall Gazette* and his *Figaro* before an oak fire, with a pipe of fragrant tobacco to make him yet more comfortable, the ponies sped on, under the lash of his wife's whip, through the chilly and windy morning.

"Are you grown dumb, Io?" she said, sharply, as they flew over the frosted turf.

Ioris drew his furs closer across his mouth.

"It is not agreeable to swallow ice," he said coldly, but the

ice that hurt him was the ice at his heart, not the ice in the air.

"It is only jealousy made her say those things!" he was thinking to himself, and his fealty went out to Etoile, with the eager revolt and the caressing devotion that slander of an absent thing he cares for will rouse in any man who has a man's heart beating within him.

And he cared for her greatly already, though he was half unwilling and half afraid to face the truth of it and all its perils, and hid it from himself under the shelter of a thousand plausible synonyms and reasons.

The Lady Joan, who heeded cold weather no more than she heeded the cold shoulder of a desirable acquaintance, cut his ponies over the ears and rattled onward; with her pistol-case under her feet in case she should be in a mood to shoot cats or robins, on both of which she waged fiery war.

The cats might kill a chicken, and the robins steal a cherry.

Ioris often pleaded for both, but in vain.

The grand old house looked bleak and dreary in the cloudy angry day, with the mountain winds rushing through the leafless aisles of its vineyards. Imperator howled in his kennel, and the heart of his master ached. The Lady Joan sprang down at the courtyard gate, and kilted her skirts high, and wrapped her waterproof about her, and calling out for Gian, for Vico, for Beppo, for Cecco, whilst those frightened servitors came tumbling out from stable, wine-cellar, tool-house, and barn, strode away, to the delight of her soul, scolding, weighing, scrutinising, ordering, railing, altering, chaffering, bullying, raising heaven and earth because a measure was short, and unpacking a waggon-load of cabbages to make sure that their number was right. She had a hundred thousand things to do before she could enjoy herself, and shoot her cats and robins.

Ioris, free for the moment, lighted a cigar, and strolled away by himself over his lonely fields, green with the tender young corn and red with bearberry and briony. He heard her voice in loud discussion with his bailiff as to which Roman bull was to be mated with the new brindled cow from Alderney, and shuddered a little in disgust as he heard. "Her Breviary is the stock-book;" he thought, and went on his lonely walk under the edge of the woods.

He thought of Etoile by her hearth.

Would she miss him this morning?

With Ioris gentle impulses were natural. His character had in it that honey of softness which the flies will eat—and tigers and bears as well as flies. Old people lived on him with no other claim than their utter uselessness; hangers-on devoured his substance because he had not resolution enough to cut them

adrift; a poor old homeless soul slipt and broke her limb as he was passing, and he took her into his own house and kept her there year upon year; an unwillingness to see pain, and an aversion to wound, were strong in him; Lady Joan found it out and despised it, and laughed at it, and profited by it all at once. "Io's such a fool," she would say—and think him such a fool—and yet all the while love the folly in him from its own utter unlikeness to herself.

It had grown to be with him as of old it was with the Capet kings and the Maires du Palais. The natural indolence and infirmity of purpose which often cripples many fine and delicate minds, found relief in her strong opinions and her decisive action. It became so much easier to answer, "Ask the signora," than to decide for himself between disputing servants or to refuse for himself a suppliant's petition. Things had to be done that he was not hard enough or rough enough to do himself; it became so much simpler to say, "Go to the signora," than incur an hour's contention, or send away an old farmer with tears in his eyes. She liked all this kind of authority and tyranny; and he detested it. So the habit of reliance on her grew; and being first sown by the generosity of his nature, became fast rooted in his nature's weakness.

There was not a question but that things went on in much more orderly mode since she had hung up her cachemire at Fiordelisa.

The old happy, careless, wasteful ways were ended, just as the old wooden ploughs that might have served Cincinnatus were replaced by new steel ones from Sheffield. True, the people were sullen and discontented; true, there was not a shepherd that did not scowl where he had been used to smile, as he leaned on his staff on the thyme-covered hills and watched his padrone go by.

"But look at the figures at Torlonia's," she would say if he remonstrated.

And how could he remind her that the figures at Torlonia's were not at the head of his own balance-sheet?

There are things that a man cannot say.

She had twisted the steward's whip and pen out of his hands with a jerk, had sent the drones and parasites flying, had brought the devil incarnate, the people thought, in screaming farm-engines; had cut down all the estimates and all the wages, had nipped off the beggars's crusts to crumble whole loaves away on her own hobbies, and had let her fancy run riot in building and cattle-breeding, if she could be said to have anything about her so aerial and foolish as a fancy.

All this was noisy, unpleasant, interminable work, though she thought it a paradise, and pooh-poohed any demurrer or

remonstrance on the part of the master of Fiordelisa with the sublime disdain she always showed for other people's feelings.

In the years that had elapsed since the family had gone there with the flower-seeds, and the kitchen boiler, and been first visited there by Lady George Scrope-Stair with her sanctifying knitting-needles, the quiet noble old place had known few moments of peace. Hammers had almost always been going; workmen working; smiths soldering; delvers digging; in a confusion of sounds that made Ioris's head ache, and made yawning gaps in his capital for endless wages. There is nothing in the world so amusing as to make improvements when other people will pay for them; vestries, landscape-gardeners, architects and city ædiles, all know this; and Lady Joan was not a whit behind vestries and ædiles in her appreciation of it.

Ioris looked wistful when a brave row of evergreen oaks fell, to give place to a row of bran new granaries, raised on new principles; or a rose-garden perished to make an acre of asparagus and pine-apple beds; he looked grave when he saw the sum total that the new granaries and the asparagus and pine-apple beds cost: did not the old barns and threshing-floors, the old vegetables and orchards, do just as well?

"You'll find the profit of it all by-and-by," said the Lady Joan to him: as the vestries and ædiles say so to the public. But he failed ever to see the profit; he could only see Black Care as the bills came in, and the labourers crowded round his steward to be paid, week after week, month after month.

No doubt Lady Joan was a great administrator, but great administrators are expensive luxuries to the states which support them.

Ioris had never been rich, and with the new granaries and asparagus-beds, and all the other improvements, he felt himself growing poorer every hour.

He was very tired of it. He was stung by the muttered words and dark glances of his peasantry. He liked to be well with all people, and the discontent of his contadini oppressed him. In other years, when he had made brief visits in the vintage time, the people had worshipped him and met him with music and laughter and song, and their tributes of fruits and of flowers; now they passed him sullenly, or if they stopped him, stopped but to complain. He was pained by them and for them—but he did nothing. Personal kindness he would show them whenever he could. But he did not lift his hand to stay hers that fell so heavily on them.

He loved them as he loved the hound Imperator. But he feared her more.

Often he would go out in the fields and roam by himself, for very weariness, and then on the beautiful wild hillside, scarlet

with poppies, and fragrant with the wild cistus bushes, he would meet some old man or some young child, who would stop him and hold their hand out, and mutter of the tyrannies of the "padrona" up at the house, and he would give them money that he could ill afford, and go back impatient and sorrowful, and, as he passed through the house, hear the notes of the mandoline twanging, and the tinkle of the coffee-cups upon the terrace, and the laughter of Lady Joan and of Burletta, and would avoid it all with a vague distaste, and go up to his own room and lock himself in there and glance at his mother's portrait, and know that he had sinned and met his retribution.

In these old noble places life should be "set to music;" Love, in its highest passion and its fairest forms; Art as the gift of God to man; day dreams, in which the hours unfold, beautiful and uncounted, like the leaves of the oleander flowers; nights, when "the plighted hands are softly locked in sweet unsevered sleep;" gay laughter here and there, glad charity with all things; meditation now and then to deepen the wellsprings of the mind; the open air always; limbs bathed in the warmth as in a summer sea; opal skies of evening watched with fancies of the poets; and everywhere perpetual sense of a delicious rest, and of desire and of hope crowned to fruition; this was the life for Fiordelisa.

And he knew it.

And he instead abode in this: fierce wrangle, lowest aims; shrewd watchfulness for gain, perpetual chatter of art as means of loss and profit; hard tyranny and sated possession that dress themselves as passion, and made dupes one of each other; and all through the long and radiant hours of the day one voice for ever ringing in glee or wrath because a bird was shot, or theft of grain unpunished, or grapes by the high road poached, or old coins dug up under the garden-mould that could be sold again, or old pottery found in some poor peasant's hut, bought for a loaf of bread, and good in the winter for the guineas of a millionaire.

And he endured the one life and he dreamed of the other; and knew what the years might be, yet bore with them as they were from habit and from fear and from inertia, and meanwhile the Lady Joan reigned as she chose in Fiordelisa, and cut the trees, and weighed the produce, and vulgarised the rooms, and harried the peasantry, and meddled with the wine-presses, and rooted herself into the soil, so that never should any step save hers be heard there, and never any offspring of his old race bloom there; and heeded not the desolation that she worked for him; heeded it no more than she did the curse of the peasant hungering in his hut, or the pangs of the song-bird dying in the summer.

What did his sighs or his people's matter to her?

So long as she kept Fiordelisa and drove Pippo and Grillo about, and trafficked in pictures and laces and furniture, and exhibited her lover in all places and possibilities to everybody as her prey and property and appendage, what did it matter to her whether the heart of the man was weary, or his nerves jaded, or his passion worn out—what did it matter to her that all liberty and peace and gladness had withered for him under her touch? What did it matter to her that he shut his eyes with a shudder from facing the blank that was all his hereafter?

Women who love to folly may watch with terror a weary glance, may torture their own hearts in endless doubt whether they be not unworthy of the heart that beats upon theirs, may be ready to cast themselves adrift on a sea of misery rather than drag as a weight for a day on the life that is dearer than their own soul to them. But the Lady Joan was no such fool.

She had got him and she held him fast, as a fisherman a prize from the sea. He might writhe, might sigh, might struggle, might sicken, might be weary at times unto death—what did she care for that? She saw a glimpse of it sometimes, and it smote her vanity to the quick, though she never comprehended its full import; but it never entered her thoughts to release him or offer him release. She only pulled the curb tighter, and revenged herself by sharper observation and by harder tyranny.

So long as she had what she wanted, and incurred no mortification in the sight of others, she was not likely to set him free for any consideration so slight and unimportant to her as his own wishes. Weak women thought about those things, but Lady Joan was strong.

This day seemed to him more long and tedious than any he had ever passed.

When they sat down to luncheon in the chilly tapestried room which wanted summer and the roses of summer to brighten it, she entertained him with a bead-roll of her victories and her captives, of a stable-boy's theft punished, a kite killed and nailed to the door, a hundred thrushes trapped for market, a fox's earth found and stopped that the fox might die of suffocation in its hole, a false bottom to a sieve detected as the grain was measured, an error found in the manure receipts, a stray dog shot, a cat hanged by the neck, a litter of pigs born. He listened wearily; he was tired of it all, because he was tired of her.

As yet he scarcely realised that this—the *quart d'heure de Rabelais*, to which all passion that is merely passion comes soon or late—had struck for him. He was silent and inattentive

throughout the midday meal; and, when at length the Lady Joan, furious at his indifference, uprose from his table and threw some silver off it, and told him that he deserved to be ruined and die in the hospital, and that she was a fool to fag out her life for him as she did, he could only sit silent still, being unable to reply according to his honest thoughts, and only hoped that she would not go into hysterics. Lady Joan could have hysterics when all other weapons failed, as well as the merest Rosa-Matilda that ever breathed.

This time, however, she did not go into them, because she had a great many last instructions to give to the *butler* about that Alderney cow, and also remembered that she was to dine at seven o'clock with her cousins Lord and Lady Fingal at the Iles Britanniques. For checking hysterics there is no receipt so good as to remember a dinner-party.

It was twilight in the freezing winter's day when she deigned at length to depart, with some pine-apples out of the hotbeds for her friends, and give her last order, and leave the grand old house to the night and the cold, and drive back across the plain with two mounted shepherds behind them, well armed, in case of any thieves that might spring from behind a ruined tomb or cluster of acacias.

They reached home in safety, where Mr. Challoner, having passed a tranquil afternoon in the club and at the Messina Bridge offices, where he was held an oracle, was waiting, ready dressed for the Fingal dinner, with lighted lamps and an evening newspaper, serene and solemn in his solitude as a Red Indian chief at a "big smoke."

Ioris, who was not invited to the Fingal party, excused himself from remaining to see them off on the plea of a chill he had felt and much correspondence to answer, and hurried to the house of Etoile ere it should be the hour for his attendance at the Quirinal.

"I cannot sleep without seeing her," he said to himself.

"What on earth's come to Io, I wonder," said the Lady Joan very crossly. "He's always ill now—or stupid."

Mr. Challoner lifted his eyes from his *Pall Mall Gazette*.

"In love," he said, curtly, with immovable visage, and replaced his eyeglass, which had dropped. He and his wife always kept up a polite fiction between themselves, even in private; Ioris was their common friend.

Lady Joan darted from her brilliant eyes such a look of flame as a tigress might give whose hard-earned prey was snatched from her jaws.

"Pshaw!" she said, savagely, "what an idiot you are, Robert, always!"

Mr. Challoner perused the *Pall Mall Gazette* unmoved: revenge was sweet, but peace was sweeter.

Fortunately, to preserve his peace in the absence of the supreme guardian of it, there entered handsome Douglas Græme, her cousin, who came to escort his cousin to their other cousins, the Fingals; and Lady Joan rushed to get herself into Genoa velvet, Irish point, and English propriety.

Meanwhile Ioris went and found Etoile in her chamber alone by the warmth of the hearth, and the spacious, quiet room, with its smell of hot-house heliotropes, and the odorous many-flowered narcissus—which in Italy we call *tazzette*, and in France *Jeannettes*, and in England have no popular name for, because we have not the plant—looked very familiar and inviting to him as he entered it, himself jaded, cold, and weary.

"I can stay but a few moments, I fear, but I thought I might venture to ask if you were well," he said, softly bending to her with that look in his eyes by which a man tells the woman he looks on that she is a dearer sight to him than any other the world holds.

"You are not well yourself, you seem tired?" Her voice trembled a little as she spoke to him, and her eyes fell before his.

"I am tired," he said, with a sigh.

The long, tasteless, dreary day unrolled before his memory as he spoke, begun in the chilly morning with altercation and strife, worn away in common cares and calculations of price and profit, ended with rough dispute or with coarse mirth as the sun began to grow low behind his leafless vineyards. They were all alike, these weary days, when it pleased his despot to call him forth in the cold mist that rose from the river, and make him go out to the old grey castle on the hill to levy tribute from his farms, and number his winter fruits, and harry the hearts of his people, in the pastime that she called looking after Fiordelisa.

Once, when this passion had been young in him, he had risen joyfully enough to skim the grey Campagna with her ere the day was fully up, and pass the hours in enamoured willingness in the solitudes of his deserted halls. But now!—he rose to these days with a yawn, he felt their dull length drag on and on with a sigh; they left him at their close worn out and disdainful of himself.

"I am tired," he said, now, standing by the fire, and letting his eyes rest themselves in dreamy contemplation on Etoile.

She gave him a yellow rose from a cluster that she had been placing in water as he had entered; there was tea standing near her on a little Japanese stand; she poured him out a cup, and brought it to him by the hearth; he followed all her movements with a sense of content and peace.

As she tendered him the little cup, his fingers caressed hers, and as he drew the cup away, his lips lingered on her wrist.

She coloured and left him.

"Where have you come from now?" she asked him as she went to the roses.

The words stung him as a snake stings.

"I have come from Fiordelisa."

"Alone?"

"No! Have I ever the luxury to be alone?"

Her heart beat quicker with an anger that she did not seek to analyse.

"Why complain of what is your choice?"

"Was it ever *my* choice?" he muttered, thinking of those earliest hours when a black-browed stranger had set her will to bring him to her feet.

"Surely it must have been when you gave Fiordelisa."

"I never gave Fiordelisa. I thought at most of one summer—of two——"

"Then how is it?——"

"How? Can I bid her go? I?"

Etoile rose and walked to and fro a moment impatiently, pushing her hair out of her eyes.

"It is useless for me to pretend to misunderstand. Your position is not one a woman can talk of—without shame. But it were absurd to deny that I see it in its true light, and that I am very sorry for you; very, very sorry! And yet how can you live on in it? The triangle of Dumas!—how unreal, how deceitful, how contemptible, how absolutely immoral in the deepest sense of immorality's degradation, is this sin that you and she, and the world with you, call Friendship. Sin!—the naked sins of the old days were innocence and decency beside it. One can excuse sin that is honest, one can comprehend the fatal force of a blind passion, one can see how even an unholy love may be redeemed by sacrifice and courage. But this!—it is only one long lie palmed off upon the world, and as cowardly as every lie must ever be!"

"The world is not deluded by the lie, believe me," said Ioris with his delicate contempt.

"If you had loved this woman," she pursued disregarding, "if you had loved her really with any kind of great love, however guilty before the laws of man, could you have ever borne to live like this, to take the husband's hand, to caress the child, to act the social farce—if you had really loved her with any truth of love, such share of her with her duties and her friends would have been impossible to you, such adoption of her hearth and home would have been loathsome!"

"There is love and love," said Ioris. "You think of a kind of love that is seldom felt, that women like her cannot kindle. You do not understand——"

"No! I do not understand. I understand passion, though

I have not felt it—if you had struck the husband down upon the hearth, and borne the wife away from all the world—that I could have understood.”

Ioris laughed a dreary scornful laugh.

“I know not which soonest would have repented such a tragedy—she or he or I. There are women for whom the world may well be lost. Seriously, can you think her one of them?”

“You must have thought her one of them once, at the least, or else——”

“Good heavens! how little you realise, how little you comprehend——”

His thoughts drifted back to the early time when a new comer with basilisk eyes had cast her toils about him. The love born and matured behind black masks, in the fumes of cigarette smoke, in the riot of cotillons, in the daybreak hours after a ball, was not the love of which his companion spoke. The world well lost for love!—he laughed out of the very weariness and heart-sickness of his soul, thinking of his mistress in loup and domino—in ruff and starch—screaming in the dingy crowd of the opera ball—lunching off lamb and lettuce with a dean!

“Perhaps I do not comprehend. I am glad then I do not!” said Etoile, with more impatience than she knew. “If you slew the husband—or he you—I am barbarian enough to feel that that might come within my sympathies. It would at least be frank!”

Ioris laughed lightly and bitterly.

“Poor man! he is terribly tiresome and *très bourgeois*. But why should I kill him for that? As to his killing me, I am his best friend, his *souffre-douleur*, his whipping-boy. Whatever other qualities he may lack, he is not ungrateful—to me!”

Etoile unconsciously pulled asunder a rose she held, and shred its petals on the floor.

“I said I was sorry for you. I retract it. Since you can jest so about your fate, you are worthy of it.”

“Jest!—I?”

He stooped and took her hands, and kissed them with a half-timid and half-passionate tenderness.

“If I jest, it is to hide that I suffer. Be sorry for me, Heaven knows I need it!

And he kissed her hands again, and went to the Court, where he was in waiting that night.

Etoile stood by her hearth with the fallen rose leaves at her feet.

She felt as if some share of their falsehood and of their shame had fallen on her.

And yet a sweet and subtle joy which she felt afraid of stolo upon her too.

CHAPTER XXI.

MEANTIME the Lady Joan went and dined with her cousins the Fingals, and returned thence, much out of temper, to her own house. The dinner at the Fingals had tried her patience sorely; it had been severe, dreary, dull; she had sat between an archaeologist and a travelling Oxford Professor; neither had felt her fascinations, one had corrected her on a point of art; it was an utterly "blank day," both for business and amusement. She felt as ill-used as any M. F. H. who had been out from noon to night in rain and fog, and has never once "found." Lady Joan hated waste of time, or waste of anything, even of lamp-cottons; and she scolded her servants for having so many lamps burning when she went home.

By the light of one of them she read some telegrams and letters; they did not improve her temper. They told her that the shares of the Bridge over the Messina Straits, to which the Italian ministers had refused the subsidy were a drug on the market, and that a fine Parmeggianino she had sent to London for sale had been examined by rude experts, and declared good for nothing but the big piece of cypress-wood on which it was painted.

"Fools! dolts! idiots!" said Lady Joan, sweeping all the European exchanges and all European connoisseurs into the mighty circle of her scorn. *She* had promoted the Bridge, *she* had purchased the Parmeggianino; was that not enough for the world?

"They'll say my pigs are not Berkshires next!" she said in her wrath.

"No, no, no," murmured Burletta, who had come in for a midnight cigar. "No, no, no!—the pigs are transcendant pigs; of the plumpness and the roundness and the pinkness of babies are those pigs, and their bacon will be as a foretaste of paradise; but as for pictures, and especially the Parmeggianino, you will do me the justice to admit, *cara mia*——"

"That you're a transecdant ass!" said the Lady Joan, furiously.

The very dear old Mimo lifted his shoulders to his ears and his eyebrows to the ceiling, and solemnly lighted an enormous cheroot.

"I always said the Parmeggianino would not go down in the City of London; I always said that it would not go down," he

reiterated, for he adored his goddess, but he adored still more proving himself in the right, and he had always averred that the Parmeggianino was too crude, was too brown, was too big, was too glazed, was too strong meat, in point of fact, even for Shoddy's acres of plaster walls.

"You thankless brute!" cried his Minerva, flinging all her letters away in a crumpled ball. "Is that all your gratitude for my getting your Tabernacle sold to the Fingals?"

The very dear old Mimo reposed his fat person comfortably amongst the sofa cushions.

"My Tabernacle is a beautiful Tabernacle," he said, tranquilly. "Pure *Quattro Cento*; pure *Quattro Cento*; that I will swear—not a detail of it that is not *Quattro Centisto*; I chose every detail myself; and the wood is old—old—old—that too I will swear, and I ought to know, for the wood was a flour-hutch of my mother's when I was a baby, per Bacco! What more would Milordo Fingal have?"

"You are an ass, Mimo!" said Lady Joan again, but she laughed a little whilst she frowned.

"Che-che—no! That I am not," said Burletta stoutly. "In my way I am very wise. I know what the City of London and its very clever people will accept and what it will not accept, though I have never been there. It will be on its knees before my Tabernacle, if Milordo Fingal will show it in their Fine Arts Court; all their South Kensington will adore my mother's flour-hutch. But I did always say, you will allow, that the Parmeggianino——"

Lady Joan gave him a sounding box on the ear. Undisturbed, Burletta picked up his cigar, which had been shaken out of his mouth by the shock, and kissed the Lady Joan's cruel fingers.

"Keep to the pigs, mia carissima, and let me choose the pictures," he said, with paternal tenderness. And together they smoked the calumet of peace.

In the recesses of his own soul Burletta began to have his doubts about Palmerstonè; began to think that Palmerstonè might after all not be very much more genuine than the over-big Parmeggianino. He began to think that Minerva, like Jove, sometimes nodded, and that the Messina Bridge, and other wonderful benefits to mankind, were not very much more trustworthy than his own rickety Renaissance chairs, and not one half as solid as that venerable flour-hutch, which his zeal for the antique had transformed into a tabernacle. But his misgivings he shut into his own loyal soul; and trotted about none the less valiantly, holding up his plump hands, and crying—

"What a woman—ah, what a woman! Such influence, such power, such wisdom! And yet, look how she stoops to trifles—those hams, those wines, those capons——" And then would be unable to proceed further from sheer ecstasy.

For to the very dear old Mimo who had slender fare at home, and indeed had been used to satisfy nature off a roll and a sausage at a small *osteria*, the breakfasts and dinners of the Casa Challoner and Fiordelisa were as banquets of the gods; and it would have been hard indeed if, in return for them, he would not have held up his hands and cried aloud—

“Such a woman—ah, such a woman! The world has not her equal. There is nothing that she does not know, and nothing that she cannot do—nothing, nothing, nothing!”

And a good many people believed him, as they believed in his cracked bits of Limoges and his flour-hutch that was promoted to a tabernacle. There is nothing that you may not get people to believe in if you will only tell it them loud enough and often enough, till the welkin rings with it. A *claque* is an institution not confined to theatres, and naturally for a well-born lady who would take Lord and Lady Fingal to see his yellow ivories and his old Cremona fiddles, and could get him sublime orders from the mighty Hebrides for all sorts of things, from church doors as big as Alps to enamels no bigger than your thumb, the good and grateful Mimo felt that he could never clap his hands loud enough before the stage of the world.

If she made mistakes—*ouf!*—she was a woman, or, at least, Mimo would say, with a sadder misgiving that this admission was derogatory to her—she was a goddess. But he, who metaphorically was the owl at the feet of this Minerva, could be familiar with her, as the owl may have jovially flapped its wings in merry moments over the disbarred Casque and the unbuckled Ægis, and in such confidential familiarity would venture to say to her—

“Keep to the pigs, *mia carissima*, and let me choose the pictures.”

CHAPTER XXII.

LADY JOAN, who, when she was not blinded by the mufflers of her vanity and inordinate belief in herself, was very sharp-sighted, saw that Society, when it has strained itself to swallow a good deal that is as much against its laws as wine against the Koran's, will, by the natural law of expansion and recoil, require to be equally severe in refusing to swallow something else if only in justification of its principles. Because Society always adheres to its principles; just as a Moslem subscribes none the less to the Koran because he may just have been blowing the froth off his bumper of Mumm's before he goes to his mosque.

The Duchess of Bridgewater was the highest and mightiest of gentlewomen, and her mere nod was honour, and if Lord Dauntless paid her bills, nobody could know it but his bankers, and all the great world stayed with her at her Castle of Indolence, in the heart of a county that crawled on its knees to her beck and her call. The Princess Gregarine was the mirror of fashion, and the privileged vixen of courts; if common soldiers in their guard-rooms toasted her as a common wanton as they drank their rum, a polite society knows nothing of what common soldiers say in their horrid guard-rooms. Lady Eyebright cheated at cards, and had her ears boxed, but she was always Lady Eyebright, because she never ran off with any one of her lovers, and had a host of great relatives making everything smooth as fast as she ruffled it. Mrs. Henry V. Clams kept open house all the year long, a pleasant hotel, where no bill was brought; with fresh pleasure for every shining hour, and no demands made on either brains or decency; a little temple of Fortune with Pætolus flowing through it, so that any who pleased could dip his glass and drink and come again. And Lady Joan—Lady Joan was a precious precedent set on high like a lamp to lighten the darkness of all those ill-matched wives who fain would be consoled, yet fain would be both pitied and respected, as martyrs to a crooked circumstance. Society would not quarrel with any of these, nor any of the thousands of whom they were the types.

Quarrel, indeed! Nothing was further from its dreams. There was that "Salve!" on the thresholds of these ladies' houses, and their like, that Society entering therein, and finding Vice seated by the hearth, would, on coming out, declare Vice quite a changed creature; nay, not Vice at all, but fair Friend-

ship, gentle Generosity, mere Mirth, sweet *gaieté du cœur*, or what you will, something so innocent that saints might call her sister.

But nature has an inevitable law of expansion and recoil : a society so elastic is of necessity equally tightly drawn at times.

It will adore the Duchess of Bridgewater and Princess Gregarine; it will apologise for Mrs. Henry V. Clams and Fiordelisa, and say with virtuous mien that it hates uncharitable judgment.

But, still after doing so much, it must for principle's sake condemn somebody, as the Turk, after his dry champagne, will order the stick to a Christian.

It always must have some criminal to garotte with the iron collar of its conscientious censure.

It had taken Dorotea Coronis.

Lady Joan saw no reason why it should not take Etoile too.

"Nothing against her?" she muttered, thinking over what she had heard. "How sick one gets of their saying so! Nothing against her? There must be *heaps*, if one could only find it out! And if there isn't——"

The Lady Joan knew herself a woman of rare invention and resources; she could prove her cheap bargains to be priceless treasures, and fill princes' cabinets with her cupboard sweepings, she could make Staffordshire Saxs, and Raffaelles to order, call Titians from the nether world, and summon all antiquity: it would be odd indeed, she thought, if she could not do such a little thing as smirch a character and blast a life.

"You make buttons out of Dante's skull!" cries Giusti in reproach to the world; Lady Joan saw no reason why she should not sharpen poison-arrows from her enemy's brain; for into an enemy her irritable, suspicious and self-conscious temper had already in her own thoughts raised Etoile.

"I don't know anything about her," she would say with fine frankness to her society. "My father knows her a little—yes—but then he's so good to all the world, and he always tries to believe the best of everybody. Of course she has wonderful talent, but she must have had a very strange life—all alone, and amongst men so much, and hating women; where could she learn all she has done too, and get all that passion of the verses, and the other things? One wonders—that couldn't *all* be got out of a breviary. Oh, I dare say what she says is true; it may be, no doubt it is. Still, there must be a good deal more she doesn't say—there must be. Oh, it matters so little to me, you know. If I can be of use to her, I don't mind what people like to chatter about me. My friends know me and won't misjudge me. As for the world, you know *I* never care a fig for it!"

This fiction, delivered as she could deliver her fictions, with

a steadfast glance and an honest bluntness of tone, that carried conviction to her most sceptical listeners, was a seed which, falling on congenial soil, was certain to take root and bear its fitting fruit and flower.

She never said anything direct; oh, never anything direct in the least. On the contrary, she told every one that she was herself most tolerant, and was not bound to be the judge of anybody, and had for her part seen so much of people of genius in her mother's house when she was quite a girl that she saw no harm at all in any of their eccentricities. Still here and there she would confide to her associates her distress that other people had not her tolerance and were offended at meeting Etoile.

Society, which was always vaguely averse to Etoile, because she did not conciliate it, was very willing to receive such hints. There were high spheres of it, indeed, where the fumes of such fictions could not reach, but through all the lower strata of it these fumes spread insidiously, like sulphur-smoke.

Mrs. Phidias Pratt shook her head, not willing to do more till she was quite sure not to offend Princess Vera by doing it; Mrs. Macscrip and Mrs. Henry V. Clams, and the colonies they represented, said that all the dear Embassy people were now-a-days so far too good-natured; and the Scrope-Stair sisters began to sigh, and hum and ha, and look sorrowful and mysterious, and murmur, "Oh, don't be afraid—*don't!* She never comes to us on our day, she doesn't indeed; and, of course, if ever she did we would take care there should be no risk of your speaking."

And Mr. Silverly Bell, with his softest voice and most purring manner, carried his gentle countenance into many a decorous drawing-room, and dropped a hint—just a hint—dear Lady Joan was too good-natured, dear Lord Archie was a trifle imprudent; out of kindness, oh yes, purest kindness, but a mistake; no,—he didn't wish to say anything, he never said anything; he was not a gossip, like dear Lady Cardiff; nothing he abhorred more than gossip; still, when he loved and valued any one as he did—whoever it was he was calling on—he thought it right to warn them from making any acquaintance they might hereafter regret.

In a word, he earned his luncheons and dinners and petting in the Casa Challoner. All the Lady Joan's pets had to work hard for her.

This however did not, of course, prevent Mr. Silverly Bell from calling, himself, eagerly on Etoile, and drinking her tea with a slice of lemon in it, and feeling very comfortable by her fire, and pretending to adore her and Tsar.

"A *man* may go anywhere!" he would say with a pretty deprecating little smile, when Mrs. Macscrip or Mrs. Middleway would tax him with going very often to the Montecavallo to see "that" woman.

"A man may go anywhere, and an *old* man, too!" he would say charmingly, and look a little guilty, as if he saw and heard things in the rooms by the Rospigliosi gardens that were sadly tempting to the old Adam, old though it was in him.

The spy of Society is an institution quite as useful to private ends as to political ones. As his reward, Lady Joan asked him to a dinner given for the Hebrides, and told Lady Hebrides he was her dear old Saint Paul.

"Dear, dear!" thought Lady Cardiff, when she saw these sulphur fumes rising, "why didn't she take a caprice for a married man, have a fancy for a drunken sculptor, go to nasty museums in men's clothes, or anything of that kind. They would have said nothing about her *then*. When a person is famous the world will have stories of some sort. It's better to give it something tangible, it talks much less; Heavens! if she'd only had a caprice for an attic and an artist, or spent six months with the married man, as I say, we should all be swearing her innocence till we were hoarse—just as the dear Scrope-Stairs swear to Lady Joan's. You ought never to disappoint the world. It is a *pieuvre*, and has a million mouths; you can't shut them all; you can only give them something to suck."

Etoile, meanwhile, was serenely unconscious of all these threads netting, and mouths opening about her feet, and had she been conscious, would have been as serenely indifferent.

She passed her days in great dreams and great studies; the world was beautiful about her, and its past full of all the terrible and tender mysteries of the human soul; every hour had for her some art to be pursued, some aim to be kept sight of; she believed in a god—

Qui puisse donner un astre à un âme innocent.

All the little conspiracies and petty cruelties of a world of women were noticed no more by her than were the gnats in the air, or the dust on the stones, any day that she mounted the Scala Regia to gaze at the Sistina Sibyls.

Lady Cardiff, who did not care much for the Sistina Sibyls, and who had said correctly that a grain of dust may blind you, ventured on a word of warning.

"You do not conciliate women," she said one day. "You do not think about them; oh no; of course not; but believe me, a woman who does not is socially lost. Her sex will wait—wait years maybe—but will fall on her like Destiny at last, and rend her in pieces, some way or another. To please our own sex we must either confer benefits or crave them; we must be either patron or toady."

"What a noble choice of parts you offer us!"

Lady Cardiff was invulnerable to rebuke.

"Of course, to patronise is more agreeable," she pursued imperturbably. "But I am not sure but what the toady in the long run gets most cakes and ale. Believe me, women hold the keys of the world for a woman; but to get the keys you must crawl to their goodwill upon your knees, as the true believers up the Scala Sancta. To a fearless temper that respects itself this is impossible, you say? Yes, my dear, and that is just why frank and fearless spirits have generally such a very bad time of it in this world. There is only one way to deal with women: be very civil to their faces, and do them all the harm you can, especially behind their backs in a drawing-room; never offend one and never trust one; kiss them as if they were your salvation, and watch them as if they were your assassins. 'Live with your friends, remembering they will one day be your enemies.' Talleyrand's advice is sound for our sex at all events. If you want a thing made public, tell it to three women separately in private; cry; say it will be ruin to you if it ever get known; and by seven o'clock next day all the town will have heard of it. You may be quite satisfied of that. Women never like one another, except now and then an old woman and a young woman like you and me. They are good to one another amongst the poor, you say? Oh, that I don't know anything about. They may be. Barbarians always retain the savage virtues. In society women hate one another. All the more because in society they have to smile in each other's faces every night of their lives. Only think what that is, my dear!—to grudge each other's conquests, to grudge each other's diamonds, to study each other's dress, to watch each other's wrinkles, to outshine each other always on every possible occasion, big or little, and yet always to be obliged to give pet names to each other, and visit each other with elaborate ceremonial—why women *must* hate each other! Society makes them. Your poor folks, I dare say, in the midst of their toiling and moiling, and scrubbing and scraping, and starving and begging, do do each other kindly turns, and put bread in each other's mouths now and then, because they can scratch each other's eyes out, and call each other hussies in the streets, any minute they like, in the most open manner. But in society women's entire life is a struggle for precedence, precedence in everything—beauty, money, rank, success, dress, everything. We have to smother hate under smiles, and envy under compliment, and while we are dying to say "you hussy," like the women in the street, we are obliged, instead of boxing her ears, to kiss her on both cheeks, and cry, 'Oh, my dearest—how charming of you—so kind!' Only think what all that repression means. You laugh? Oh, you very clever people always do laugh at these things. But you must study Society, or suffer from it, sooner or later. If you

don't always strive to go out before everybody, life will end in everybody going out before you; everybody—down to the shoe-black! Study Society, my love, or else do not come into it at all. To live like De Quincey or Wordsworth is comprehensible, though I should fancy it very uncomfortable. But a middle way is idiocy. You only please *neither* the Hermits nor Vanity Fair."

"Is it so very necessary to please anybody?"

Lady Cardiff shrugged her shoulders.

"That depends, my dear, on one's own desires. I should say it was very necessary; Mrs. Henry V. Clams would say so, Lady Joan would say so, all Society would say so. But I'm sure I daren't say it is for you. You don't seem to care for all we care for; I believe Society seems to you no better than a Flemish kermesse."

"Not half so good! At a kermesse the children at least are genuine, with their gilded cakes and their merry go-rounds. In our society the very children are *blasés* before they are in their teens. Little Nadine Apraxine was invited to luncheon when I was with her the other day; she is eight years old. She came up to her mother and whispered, 'Make an excuse for me; I don't wish to go; their cook is not good.'"

"A discerning child," said Lady Cardiff with approval. "An admirable child; I wish she was my grand-daughter. She will have a future, that child; as for the rest of us, I am sure our cakes are gilt, my dear, we won't touch them if they aren't; and we go round and round on the same wooden horse, God knows, every year of our lives; we are very like the kermesse after all. And we do enjoy ourselves, you are mistaken if you think we don't; perhaps things look blue in the morning, that comes of the champagne and the chloral; but by the time we get 'done up' and begin our visits, we are really enjoying ourselves, and go on doing it till the small hours. *Blasé*, of course, everybody is in a sense, but there's always some ammonia to smell of, that wakes us up: when we're young the ammonia is coquetry, when we're old it's scandal. When we've got our eyebrows neatly drawn, and our eyes nicely washed with kohl, and are ready for the kermesse, we jump on one or other of the wooden horses, and away we go to a 'rosy time,' as the racing men say. I don't think people get tired; not in your sense: bless you, little Nadine Apraxine will never tire of finding that her friends' cooks are bad, till she hasn't a tooth left that isn't a false one to mumble her dinner. The joy of disparagement ever dies till we die. There are two things that nobody never tires of, they are the pleasures of excelling and of depreciating."

"Excelling!—it is rather a Dead Sea apple, I fear. The effort is happiness, but the fruit always seems poor."

Lady Cardiff could not patiently hear such nonsense.

"There you are again, my dear feminine Alceste," she said, irritably, looking at things from your solitary standpoint on that rock of yours in the middle of the sea. *You* are thinking of the excelling of genius, of the possessor of an ideal fame, of the 'Huntress mightier than the moon,' and *I* am thinking of the woman who excels in Society—who has the biggest diamonds, the best *chef*, the most lovers, the most *chic* and *chien*, who leads the fashion, and condescends when she takes tea with an empress. But even from your point of view on your rock, I can't quite believe it. Accomplished ambition must be agreeable. To look back and say, 'I have achieved!'—what leagues of sunlight sever that proud boast from the weary sigh, 'I have failed!' Fame must console."

"Perhaps; but the world, at least, does its best that it should not. Its glory dises are of thorns."

"You mean that superiority has its attendant shadow, which is calumny? Always has had, since Apelles painted. What does it matter if everybody looks after you when you pass down a street, what they say when you pass?"

"A malefactor may obtain that sort of flattery. I do not see the charm of it."

"You are very perverse. Of course I talk of an unsullied fame, not of an infamous notoriety."

"Fame now-a-days is little else but notoriety," said Etoile, with a certain scorn, "and it is dearly bought, perhaps too dearly, by the sacrifice of the serenity of obscurity, the loss of the peace of private life. Art is great and precious, but the pursuit of it is sadly embittered when we have become so the plaything of the public, through it, that the simplest actions of our lives are chronicled and misconstrued. You do not believe it, perhaps, but I often envy the women sitting at their cottage doors, with their little children on their knees: no one talks of *them*!"

"J'ai tant de gloire, ô roi, que j'aspire au fumier!"

said Lady Cardiff. "You are very thankless to Fate, my dear, but I suppose it is always so."

And Lady Cardiff took refuge in her cigar ease, being a woman of too much experience not to know that it is quite useless to try and make converts to your opinions; and especially impossible to convince people dissatisfied with their good fortune that they ought to be charmed with it.

"It is very curious," she thought when she got into her own carriage, "really it makes one believe in that odd doctrine of, what is it, Compensations; but, certainly, people of great talent always are a little mad. If they're not flightily mad with

eccentricity and brandy, they are morbidly mad with solitude and sentiment. Now, she is a great creature, really a great creature; might have the world at her feet if she liked; and all she cares for is a big dog, a bunch of roses, and some artist or poet dead and gone three hundred or three thousand years! It is very queer. It is just like that extraordinary possession of Victor Hugo's; with powers that might have sufficed to make ten men brilliant and comfortable, he must vex and worry about politics that didn't concern him in the least, and go and live under a skylight in the middle of the sea. It is very odd. They are never happy but when they are unhappy; and if you tell them that Addison could be a great writer, and yet live comfortably and enjoy the things of this world, they only tell you contemptuously that Addison had no genius, he had only a Style. I suppose he hadn't. I think if I were one of them and had to choose, I would rather have only a Style, too."

That night Lady Cardiff went to a very big dinner at Mrs. Henry V. Clams'; the dinner which Etoile had declined. Fontebranda had arranged it as he arranged everything, from the ball she once gave an Imperial Prince to the tisane she took when she caught a chill; and on this night it was an unspeakably grand affair, all ablaze with princes and ministers.

"We married women have a good time out here," Mrs. Henry V. Clams, in her dressing-room a few hours before, wrote to a sister in the States. "If I'd stayed at home I'd have been set away among the old folks long ago; girls are all the go in New York; in Europe, girls aren't nowhere; it's right down horrid to see 'em, batches and batches of 'em, and not a man to waltz with 'em if there's a married woman got a clean place on her ticket. You should see Heloise B. Dobbs, you remember her shooting that fine young man in St. Louis: she's fifty, as you know, if she's an hour; my dearest dear, she wears lower dresses than any of us, half a foot below the shoulder blades, and you'll leave her spinning like a steam-wheel in the cotillon if you slope off any minute before day-dawn."

And Mrs. Henry V. Clams, having poured so much truth into the bosom of her sister in New York, had herself arrayed in white taffetas, embroidered in silver with rosebuds and humming-birds, and with humming-birds on her shoulders, humming-birds in her hair, and humming-birds on her shoes, went down to her big dinner, and met Mrs. Heloise B. Dobbs, who with a narrow strap about her waist, and an infinitesimal strap over each shoulder, made up in diamonds what she lacked in dress, and each cried to the other, "My dearest dear! How lovely you look!" and each thought of the other—"The Jezebel! the girls would lynch her down home!"

The dinner was a great success; all that Mrs. Henry V. Clams

did was a success, thanks to Fontebranda. Comet clarets, Highland salmon, pines from Covent Garden, and everything else from Paris, was Alberto Fontebranda's recipe for making Society smile, and Society always smiled very sweetly. Mr. Henry V. Clams sometimes, paying the bills, did not smile; but then nobody minded what he did or did not.

"What 'd you bring me to Europe for if I aren't to make a figger in it?" said his wife very sensibly. "It's puffectly daft to cry out as you do; you can't make a figger for nothing, and your pile's as big as the Catskills!"

And Mr. Henry V. Clams was silenced, because it was sweet to him also to make a figure, if only vicariously, and to entertain princes, even if they never distinguished him from his footmen.

He made a struggle once to sit at the bottom of his own table, but resigned even that because Fontebranda told him contemptuously, "*Tout cela, c'est changé maintenant, passé de mode tout à fait!*"

Mr. Henry V. Clams felt that in New York he would have tried a playful six-shooter on his familiar friend Fontebranda.

But he was in Europe, and wished to make a figure. So, without disputing, he sat at the side, and felt incongruous and jostled, and could never be brought to understand that his wife being opposite to him, the sides were the top and the bottom; but he had to sit there, and supposed it was Fashion. She had always Fontebranda on her left hand, and some illustrious being on her right; that was Fashion too.

Mr. Henry V. Clams would have been happier eating devilled tomatoes in Delmonico's.

When the great dinner was over and the big bow-wow folks (as Mrs. Henry V. Clams would call them sometimes when her spirits were high and her Fashion forgot) were all departed, Mr. Henry V. Clams, bowing on the top of his stairs, and being supposed by most to be a groom of the chamber too nervous for his place, the inner life of the Palazzo Clams came coyly from its hiding-place out on to the hearth, that is to say, whisky, rum, and "pick-me-ups" were rolled in with card-tables; cigar-boxes were opened, and a little roulette-wheel began to turn for those who liked it.

A dozen people, intimate friends, remained, and the host and hostess were always willing to lose their money for those who helped them to make a figure. Mr. Henry V. Clams rattled the napoleons in his trousers pocket, spat furtively into a Swiss *jardinière*, drank a choice drink called "wake-the-dead," and began to feel once more an independent citizen.

"Alberto," said his wife.

"*Ma très-chère?*" responded Fontebranda.

"That's been a big thing!"

"*Bien réussi, chère, mais oui.*"

"But there's one thing riles me, right down riles me," said Mrs. Henry V. Clams, also sipping the "wake-the-dead."

"I know," said the voice of her husband solemnly. "The canvas-backs wanted green ginger. I guess you don't get ginger green in this country?"

The idiotey of this remark passed unnoticed, because no one ever noticed his remarks unless it was absolutely necessary to reprove or instruct him.

"Riles!" echoed Fontebranda. "*Cela veut dire*—riles?"

"*Qui m'agace*," explained Mrs. Henry V. Clams, pronouncing it with a fine breadth of tone as "mag-ass." "*Qui m'enrage!* There was a German serene, a Russian own cousin-to-the-throne, a French marshal, an English peeress, two embassies, and the Lord knows how many of your own dukes and princes, Alberto, and yet with all those that woman wouldn't come?"

"Woman? woman? *Mais qui donc?*" said the Count Alberto, staring hard over his halo of smoke.

"Etoile!"

"Bah!" said Fontebranda, with scorn.

"Oh, you may 'bah!'" retorted his sovereign mistress as she threw her own cigarette fiercely into a cluster of azaleas. "It riles me; it makes me downright mad! Are those first-class prize-trotters to dine here, and that one-horse concern, *an artist*, to say no?"

Lady Joan Challoner, who was lying back in an arm-chair smoking, with Ioris on one side of her, and Eccelino di Sestri and Douglas Græme on the other, took her cigar out of her teeth, and smiled pleasantly.

"Dear Mrs. Clams, what can it matter? I think she showed good feeling for once. I wish she'd showed as much for us, and never brought her letters to me!"

The face of Ioris grew paler even than was its wont, and his brows contracted, as he sat on the arm of her chair.

He was silent, and was ashamed of his silence.

He felt false to his fairest faith; he felt a coward and untrue, yet his lips remained closed.

Mrs. Henry V. Clams, whose spirits were high, owing to the success of her "big thing," and the draught of the "wake-the-dead," threw one knee over the other comfortably as she leaned back in her chair, and smoked her cigarette.

"Dear Lady Joan, now, do tell!" she said confidentially. "Come now, do tell; we're all *ong intim* here, and nobody 'll go and say anything. Who was she? do tell! I'll bet you know."

Lady Joan looked sorrowful, and settled the spilla in her hair.

"N—no, I don't," she said slowly. "At least, you know, not

positively, and I don't want to do her any harm, why should I? Of course I've heard a good many stories, who hasn't? but artists are always like that, you know, and of course she could not be the anatomist she is without—well, without very queer studies. Look how she must have studied the nude! Been in the most horrible anatomical museums and academies. No doubt must have been!" she said in conclusion, with a touching modesty, though on some occasions she vowed she despised all Prudes, and had hung up behind her seat at her dinner table a most unblushing and colossal Nudity, which she called Titian's "Choice of Paris." But then these trifling incongruities never disturbed her: she knew that Mrs. Grundy does not mind a few incongruities.

Besides, Titian lived ever so long ago: nobody can help what *he* painted.

And then (which made such a difference also) the nudity was the joint property of herself and Mimo and Trillo—a gigantic speculation bought between them, just when the Inspecteur des Beaux-Arts was expected from St. Petersburg. The Inspecteur des Beaux-Arts was not impressed with the nudity, and would not buy it for the Hermitage, so it still hung behind the Lady Joan at dinner, waiting some more enlightened Inspecteur, or some billionaire, come out of a foundry, or a lead mine, with a love of the arts.

"Oh, my! that's real shocking!" said Mrs. Henry V. Clams, awed by the word "anatomical." She was not sure what it meant; it was vaguely associated in her mind with a travelling showman in the Far West, who had gone about with a skull, and some monstrosities in glass bottles, and a dried alligator out of the swamps.

"But that don't tell us who she was," she pursued, her thirst of curiosity stimulated by a second draught of the "wake-the-dead."

"Oh, as for that," said the Lady Joan, with a fine carelessness, "it wouldn't matter who she was, if she'd always lived decently. I can tell you who she was, if you care about it so much. She was a little girl picked off the streets by old Istrion—you know, the French painter—her mother was an 'unfortunate,' and Istrion tumbled over the child on the sill of a wine-shop. That's the simple truth. But of course that wouldn't matter, if when she'd grown up she'd kept straight."

Lady Joan blew some smoke into the air after this performance of her imagination. She had invented it quite on the spur of the moment, and felt that hours of reflection could not have enabled her to hit on anything better. She saw the face of Ioris pale, eager, and almost stern, as he strove to listen, but she spoke in her own tongue, rapidly, and he failed to follow her.

"That is the real truth," she added, "because a great friend of old Istrion's told me he'd seen the child, a dirty little brat, tumbling about in the old man's atelier when Istrion first took her home."

"Oh, my!" said Mrs. Henry V. Clams again, almost gasping from the effects of her surprise and the "wake-the-dead." "Oh, my! And yet she gives herself such highfalutin' airs! Well, I *do* like that! My word, I'd like to tell her!"

Lady Joan looked at her hostess and at all her other listeners with an honest, frank light in her steadfast eyes.

"Well, you know, I, for one, would never reproach her with that. Could she help what she was born? What I do dislike knowing her for is, that though certainly she has a certain amount of talent, she never would have been heard of if she hadn't been much too indulgent to certain great persons who can give fame with their nod; and I know that half—nore than half—of the accuracy and the beauty of her pictures, and in consequence all their celebrity, are due to the talent of an obscure lover of hers, a certain Pierre Gérarde, a great colourist, who works them up and lets them go out in her name. It is so vilely dishonest, you know; it really hurts one to think of it."

"Lord! then even her pictures aren't her own!" gasped Mrs. Henry V. Clams, in the extremity of her stupefaction resorting once more to the "wake-the-dead."

Mr. Henry V. Clams, listening on the hearth, spit softly once more into the azaleas.

"Uncommon kind of that young man," he said drily. "That young man must be a real Christian. Where was he riz, that very liberal young man, my lady?"

Lady Joan coloured a little.

"He is a Belgian, I believe," she said hurriedly. "But everybody knows it pefectly well in Paris."

"Then they must be darned fools in Paris to make a fuss over the wrong critter," said Mr. Henry V. Clams. "I believe they've a prize for Virtue: they oughter crown that most uncommon young man."

"Hold your tongue, Mr. Clams, and don't be so vulgar," said his wife, whilst Fontebranda, weary of a conversation in a tongue he could not comprehend, effected a diversion by rolling up the roulette-table a little nearer.

Lady Joan, who never gambled—she liked nothing that was uncertain—took her leave and went home with her friend.

Loris never spoke. He had not very clearly understood, but he had gathered the drift of her words enough to feel angered with her and ashamed of himself. In silence they rolled through the dark midnight towards the Casa Challoner. Lady Joan was

wondering if she had gone too far in the brilliant invention of Pierre Gérarde, but she was not much afraid. She knew that a lie makes so many friends: it is such a common pastime, and begets such a fellow-feeling in everybody. When a lie is found out, nobody is so angry with the teller of it as everybody is with the worrying and uncompromising truth-teller—he is a bore if you like.

“A cullender in not hindered by a hole more or less,” says the Eastern proverb, and she knew that Society likes culenders—if you will only pour dirty water through them.

Looking at the profile of Ioris in the uncertain, faint gleam of the light from the lamps, she mutely debated within herself whether she might translate her fiction of Pierre Gérarde and try it on him. But on reflection she desisted: he might go and tell Etoile. They drove home in an unbroken silence.

“Aren’t you coming up, Io?” she said in surprise as he turned away from her at the bottom of her own staircase.

“No!” said Ioris curtly. “And I think—I think, *ma chère*, that you might respect the names of those who are your guests and take your hand in friendship—that is all. *Felicissima notte!*”

She, stupefied with amazement and choked with rising fury, stood under the rays of her staircase lamp, gazing into the vacancy of the dark entrance-hall, as the dull sound of the closing door echoed through the house and woke Mr. Challoner, sleeping the sleep of the just and dreaming dreams of the Share List.

“My God! does he care for her!” she thought. In the dull midnight a new light broke in upon her; but it could not pierce very far through the triple folds of her own supreme vanity.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE next day was stormy and cold.

The mild and sunny weather which had graced the Carnival was passing away as the Carnival drew to its close, and the bitter winds were sweeping in from the ravines of Abruzzi and Apennines, and driving the brown Tiber into sullen swell.

Loris came out of his house in the teeth of the wind, and felt weary and chilly. He had been sitting in his own room under the watchful eyes of the portrait there, and striving to wade through a mass of papers, in the vain endeavour to understand his own position and responsibilities in regard to those mighty international works by the Gulf of Faro to which he had been persuaded to put his name. All that he could thoroughly understand was that his money was sinking into the sands of Faro, as the piles were sinking there.

That he had lost money was usually the only clear conviction that remained to him as a result of all the enterprises into which he was launched. That he would not let others lose money, through him or by him, was the only resolve, strong enough and fixed enough in his mind to resist all the influences that were around him and that laboured to shake it in him. The conviction and the resolve together were not peaceful mental food. He was not used to thought of this kind; his past was full of very different memories.

To lead a cotillon at the Tuileries, to fight a duel at the frontier, to string a guitar in a moonlit garden, to study painting in an old Academy, to woo the beauty of a court, to talk music with the Abbé Liszt, to exchange courtly ceremonials with cardinals, to rove through Alpine valleys with a hunter king—these made up a life like a Boccaccio story, like a pageant-picture of Carpaccio or Bordone indeed, but they were no meet preparation for the lore of the financial world, for the gambling of the board-room and the share market.

The dizzy figures made his eyes ache, the endless letters made his brain dull. He knew what ruin meant, and something that was not unlike ruin looked at him from the columns of numerals, from the piles of correspondence. He knew also that on his estate the columns of loss and of profit were far from equal; that in the matter of Fiordelisa, expenditure was not met by any return; every pineapple cost him about fifty francs, and every pineapple

was given away to some friend—not his own. The pineapples were a sample of the rest.

He sat and studied the dreary figures that filled sheet after sheet, from the bills paid for the pineapple-beds to the accounts for the bridge by the Gulf of Faro, and he felt bewildered and wearied. With a sword, with a paint brush, with a crabbed musical score, with an abstruse Italian or Latin poem, with a tender woman's hand stealing into his own, he would have known what to do; but with accounts and with finance!

Ioris rose, having wasted his day, and having no surer idea of what he was committed to in the present, or of what he had better do in the future, than if he had never wasted a morning of freedom over those hateful masses of arithmetic and correspondence. His head ached and his heart ached too.

He was free, for his tyrant was gone, on the arm of handsome Douglas Græme, with Silverly Bell as Propriety, to a classical concert given for a charity by Lady Anne Monmouthshire at her rooms in her hotel and, the concert ended, was to dine with the Dean of St. Edmund's, at the same great hotel, in that decorous attention to the decorums of the world which no passion, pleasure, or naughtiness ever made the Lady Joan omit, any more than passion, pleasure, or naughtiness made ladies of the Borgian era neglect their fasts or fail to make their plenary confession.

By mere instinct as he left his house, fatigued and out of spirits, his steps bore him down the crowded Corso to the old palace on the Horses' Hill, where so much of the stifled romance and resolve of his vanished youth seemed to arise for him as he crossed its threshold.

In an earlier time he had always made some excuse to his conscience; some painting, some book, some flower, some gallery hard of access, for which he brought admittance, some treasure of art unknown to the general student, of which he brought tidings; but for some time he had now neglected to use these pleas, unless interrogated by his tyrant, and he entered the house of Etoile familiarly and so frequently that the servants had ceased to go through any formula, and threw the doors open to him without bidding.

To-day it was five o'clock. Etoile was out, but would be home in a few moments so they said. He went in, and cast himself on a couch and waited.

The silence, the fragrance, the soft shadows of the room soothed him; the dog lying asleep, looked up and welcomed him lazily, then slept again; there were wet sketches, open books, fresh flowers, countless things that spoke to him as if they had voices of their absent mistress. He took up a volume that lay face downwards near him.

It was the *Nélida* of Daniel Stern.

It was open at that true and eloquent passage which seems to vibrate with the deep scorn of a courageous nature for the careful egotism of a cowardly one.

"Marcher environnée des hommages que le monde prodigue aux apparences hypocrites ; jouir à l'ombre d'un mensonge de lâches et furtifs plaisirs ; ce sont là les vulgaires sagesse de ces femmes que la Nature a faites également impuissantes pour le bien qu'elles reconnaissent et pour le mal qui les séduit ; également incapables de soumission ou de révolte, aussi dépourvues du courage qui se résigne à porter des chaînes que de la hardiesse qui s'efforce à les briser."

"It is a portrait of Joan," thought Ioris, and put the book down impatient to be reminded of what, here, he desired to forget. Yet it moved him to pleasure to think that Etoile had been reading it ; a pencil line scored by the passage told him that she also must have been thinking of "*ces vulgaires sagesse*" of the woman who claimed his allegiance, and perhaps been resenting them for his sake.

It was sweet to his sense of power to know that she should care thus ; it gave him a fuller consciousness of triumph to feel that this woman, so long above all human envies and enmities, stooped to both through his influence and for his sake. And he mis-read in a measure the emotions that moved her. Though in a sense, jealousy of the woman who had absorbed and charmed his life, it was far more a scornful impatience of the vice that cloaked itself as virtue, of the timorous time-serving that loved the world better than passion or candour. The contempt of the courageous temper for the coward's is seldom understood ; the impatience of courage for the craven meanness of a lie is seldom rightly measured.

Ioris thought she was jealous as other women were ; but he was wrong.

"Dear me !" said the voice of Lady Cardiff at that instant on the threshold of the chamber. Although a person who was never surprised at anything, she was so surprised to see him there that the ejaculation escaped her.

"How very much at home he looks, more than he ever does in the other place," she thought to herself, as Ioris rose to meet her with that gay and graceful greeting which so well became him.

"My dear Prince, charmed to see you. I only looked in for five minutes ; they said she'd be here in a moment ; pretty rooms, aren't they ? and what quantities of flowers, headaching, but pretty," said Lady Cardiff, as she seated herself on a couch opposite to him, and took out her cigarette case. "Will you have one ? Don't she let you ? She let's me. Horrid weather ; isn't it ? I have just come from Lady Anne's concert : they

have been tuning their instruments two hours; at least I thought it was tuning their instruments; but they said it was Op. 101st: Motifs on B flat. Very beautiful, they said. Queer thing, isn't it, that all the pretty things that please one are all irretrievably wrong, and everything that set's one's teeth on edge, and scratches through one's brain like a metallic tooth comb, are all scientifically exquisite. I don't profess to understand it; I suppose nightingales are all wrong, aren't they? And yet one likes to hear them. Myself, I prefer a nightingale to Op. 101st. Your friends, the Challoners, were there; at least the lady was; she it was who told me that it was Op. 101st."

"Lady Joan is fond of music," said Ioris, feeling irritated beyond endurance at the bare mention of a name that in this hour he had hoped peacefully to forget.

"Oh, that's being fond of music, is it? to shoot the nightingales and like Op. 101st. She does shoot the nightingales up at your place, doesn't she? I've heard so. But I'm sure *you* like the birds better than the metallic tooth comb, don't you?"

"I am a countryman of the melodists," said Ioris, with a smile. "I plead guilty to thinking the delight of the ear the first charm of all music; you know it is a rococo opinion scorned by all modern science."

"Oh, I know; I know," said Lady Cardiff. "The nightingales are to be summoned before School Boards, I believe, and educated out of their perverse trick of being harmonious; ours is a delightful age; each of us is merely an egg, or an atom, or a gas (*il n'y a pas beaucoup à choisir*. I think the egg's the least humiliating of the three), and Thought is only a mere secretion like bile, and Mind is only a greyish sort of sponge under the skull, and it is only an accidental crease in the sponge that makes it a Genius, a crease another way would have made it an idiot; and yet poor wretches, as we are made up of only gas and a creased sponge, we are required to be capable of appreciating Op. 101st! Now that is really absurd, you know. Don't you think so? By the way, how did the gas-and-sponge that we unhappy accidents of evolution call the Count Milliadine, get on at the court to-day? Is he liked?"

The Count Milliadine was a new Russian Minister who had been officially received that morning; Ioris had conducted the reception; *apropos* of the reception Lady Cardiff plunged into politics, which she thought much more diverting than Op. 101st.

Ioris, who himself thought even Op. 101st less odious than politics suited himself to her mood with that gracious adaptability of which he had learned the trick at courts, but Lady Cardiff, to her amusement, saw his eyes ever and again turning to a Louis Quinze clock on its bracket.

In a quarter of an hour's time Etoile returned from her

drive, and brought a fragrance of fresh-gathered violets into the chamber with her; she had been in the Dorian Woods with Princess Vera and her children.

Lady Cardiff watched the silent greeting exchanged between her and Ioris, affecting herself to be entirely engrossed with a fusée that would not strike.

"Ah, ah," thought she, wise in such signs, and swift to read them. "That is it, is it? Well, why not? Only there will be the very mischief to pay in the other place. And will he be strong enough to battle through rough weather? A bully like that dear woman that loves Op. 101st wants *such a* bully to beat her!"

Aloud, she only said—

"Dear me, how tiresome these fuscées are! Cher Prince, have you a light? a thousand thanks. Violets! what a quantity, but how unpleasantly wet! You can buy them at the street corner—not the same thing as gathering them? No? Now I should have fancied it much more agreeable. But that is one of the things that are like Op. 101st to me. You didn't hear about Op. 101st? I have been telling Ioris; I thought they hadn't finished tuning the fiddles, and it seemed the concert was over when I didn't know it had begun. Oh, thanks, my love—no—I must go really. I only waited for you ten seconds, because I wanted to hear about, etc., etc."

And she proceeded to explain some errand about a book of French memoirs promised to some Russian invalid; a mere nothing. She had come, intending to have an hour's comfortable chat over the fire in twilight; but she comprehended that one at least of them was wishing her absent, and Lady Cardiff was too sympathetic and too well-bred not to catch a situation in a glance and conform herself to its exigencies at all personal sacrifice. She bowed herself out with admirable tact, just staying long enough to look hurried and forced to go—quite naturally—and Ioris took her to her carriage.

"Dear me!" said Lady Cardiff, to herself, once more, when alone amidst her cushions. "There *will* be the mischief to pay with a vengeance. What a pity he is hampered like that!—such a nice-looking man and such admirable manners, in a day when manners are scarcely more than a tradition, and everybody shuffles about in slippers, slippers that are down at heel too for the most part. What a pity! There is nothing in the world so hard to get rid of as the nineteenth-century Guinevere, when she has made a domestic animal of the marital dragon, and knows that Arthur will never say anything unless Launcelot seems likely to leave her on his hands. Poor Launcelot! If he ever do get into the newspapers everybody is horrified at him, and full of sympathy for the dragon, but it is Launcelot that is

to be pitied—fifty to one Guinevere threw herself at his head, went down to his rooms, wrote to him at his club, did all kinds of silly things, and when she grew theatrical threatened him with Arthur. I shouldn't in the least wonder if even Mr. Challoner were to grow into the 'wronged Pendragon' if ever they find out that Guinevere has to clear out of Fiordelisa."

And Lady Cardiff settled herself amongst her cushions, and tried to read a *Journal pour Rire*, by the fading light of the day, as her carriage rumbled through the streets of Rome, but failed to be able to keep her mind to it, partly from want of light, partly from wonder as to the sentiments she had detected.

"The 'wronged Pendragon' will be very fine," she thought to herself. "It will be so very fine if only by contrast with Arthur's 'boundless trust!'"

And the idea amused her much more than did the *Journal amusant*.

Meantime Ioris had returned to the rooms that the wet violets were filling with their fragrance.

Etoile had thrown aside her furs, and stood with the firelight playing on her uncovered head and the straight folds of her velvet skirt as she placed the violets in old shallow porcelain bowls, the dog lying at her feet.

"They were the last of the year, I fear," she said to him, as he returned. "The tulips are all out under the oak woods to-day. I care most for the violets. I remember how bitterly I used to cry when I was a little child, and our old servants threw them into syrups to boil them down—to buy them at street corners seems nearly as bad. Do you understand, or is it all Op. 101st to you?"

"I understand," he said, with a smile and a sigh. "May I stay here a little while? I am tired. Figuratively, I have been at street corners all the day, buying and selling. I feel dull, chilly, and jaded. May I stay?"

"Of course," the colour flushed her face a little. She went on putting the violets in their shallow bowls beside the hearth. His eyes dwelt on her with musing tenderness, and followed the movements of her hands under their old lace ruffles amongst the forest flowers with the water drops sparkling on her fingers like diamonds.

"Why do you wear no rings?" he asked, abruptly.

She laughed a little.

"Vanity! They spoil the hand; they disguise it."

"That is a sculptor's idea; I think it is a right one. Your hands are too beautiful to need ornament——"

"Or compliment."

"Truth is not compliment. I never use the language of compliment to *you*; you know that very well. Tell me—you have been reading that book of Daniel Stern's?—*Nélida*?"

"Yes. It is not a very clever book, though written by a clever woman. But——"

"It has one passage that is eloquent. Did you think of me when you marked it?"

"Yes."

He stretched his hand out to the book and read the passage again, in silence. Then with a sigh he tossed it away.

"She might have sat for the picture," he said, with contempt.

"It is not right of *you* to say that!" Etoile said quickly, with a sense of pleasure in his wrong-doing that she blamed, for which she was impatient and scornful of herself. "It is like her, no doubt; it is like ten thousand other women probably; it is like all the feeble passions of the world which wear the cloak of convenience and the mask of a vulgar wisdom; but it is not for you to say so, since you bear with her as she is."

"Why? since we are speaking with our hands in the *Bocca della Verità* to-night?" said Ioris, his voice hissing a little between his teeth. "And, even if cowardly it be, you know very well slaves are always cowards; their tyrants make them so, and cannot complain. No!" he said quickly, changing his tone to a soft supplication, "Do not say cruel things to me. I cannot bear them from you. Perhaps I am ignoble and unmanly. Before you I feel so."

"It is not before me. It is before yourself," she said in a low voice, as she returned to the hearth, and stood in the flickering light from the burning logs. "Your name is noble; not only with the mere nobility of rank, but with all the inherited nobility of knightly actions and of chivalrous tempers; because the material greatness of your house may have vanished, that is but a reason the more to sustain it high in the respect of the world and the honour of men; you are not free to be ridiculed, you are not free to be despised; you represent the honour of a thousand years of knighthood that stands or falls with you. It is not before me that you should feel your self-surrender to an ignoble passion shameful; it is before yourself and before the memory of your forefathers!"

Ioris listened, with his head bent and his eyes drooped.

"No other woman ever spoke to me like that," he said under his breath; and was silent, leaning his arm on the old yellow marble of the mantel-piece.

"It should not be what women say; it should be what your own heart tells you. You have so much heritage of greatness in you old race, so many memories to incite and ennoble you; your country people love you and you love them; there are so many beautiful possibilities in your own future; your life on your own lands might be——"

"When my future is her prey, as the present is, and every rood of my land is blighted by her!" he muttered wearily. "Ah, you do not understand—once I too thought as you think, and dreamed of great things, or at least of a life not unworthy great memories; but Society eats away all nobility, and makes us shiftless, vacuous, worthless, and insincere as itself. What are women? Only delicate pretty triflers or mere beasts of prey, that excite our baser desires and teach us to stifle our higher natures, lest we should make them yawn. You will say it is unmanly to lay blame upon your sex. Perhaps it is. But before such a woman as you are, one learns to feel what men might be if women were more like you. You tell me it is cowardly to say that those words of that book describe the one woman who more than any other has dragged my life down to a low level, and laid it waste and barren of all hope. It is not her fault: she cannot help being what nature made her; no one can give more than they have in them. Yet it is the truth, the merest, coldest truth. What is her love for me beyond such passion as a tigress knows, and even so, for ever second to her worldly interests and worship of herself——"

"Hush, hush! It is not loyal——"

He laughed aloud.

"Loyal! I am as loyal to her as she to me. Believe me, in a guilty passion that dares the world there may be loyalty, because there may be strength; but in such an intrigue as hers and mine, public as marriage, yet steeped in hypocrisies of social lies, there can be no faithfulness, because to each other, to ourselves, and to Society, we are false: false in every caress, in every word, in every thought—a very hell of falsehood!"

"Hush!"

"Why? Let me speak the truth to you at least. No woman ever influenced me as you do. I think you could make me what you would if I were always near you. You are like the flowers you love; you speak to men of the God they have forgotten. The flowers do not know what they do, neither do you. Are you offended? Forgive me."

Etoile was silent for a moment.

"Offended? No; not that. But it is not just to her. Besides, you do not mean it."

"Let her take care of herself; she is well able. Do I not mean what I say of you? Look at me and see."

She did look at him with the calm, frank, candid regard with which she had looked always in the face of men. Their passions had never moved her, and she had controlled them or dismissed them without effort. Before the deep dreamy gaze of his eyes, caressing, ardent, mysterious with the veiled story of a passion he dared not avow, her own eyes fell; something in his look startled, troubled, hurt her.

"Prince Ioris," she said coldly, "it is half-past seven o'clock. They will be waiting for you at the Casa Challoner. You forget your duties."

Ioris recovered himself and controlled his gaze.

"I do not return there to-night; I shall go home and dine alone."

But he did not move to go; silence fell between them; he leaned against the old yellow marble by the hearth; the lids drooped over his tell-tale eyes.

A servant entered with the lamps. Her heart beat quickly; she feared she had been harsh to him.

The light seemed to fall on them as from a world they had forgotten.

"Will you dine here?" she said a little hurriedly. "In half an hour I expect my old friend Voightel; he arrives from Paris. Yes? Stay then, and re-read *Nélida* while I go away and change my gown."

He kissed her hands; left alone, it was not *Nélida* that he read, but the troubled story of his own heart.

Meanwhile he hoped that the snow on the Alps might detain Baron Voightel.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE snow did not detain Baron Voightel; at ten minutes past eight o'clock he took his green spectacles, his grey beard, and his caustic wit into the rooms of Etoile, and seeing Ioris there, who looked very much at home, and had one of her tea-roses in his coat, thought to himself with a chuckle, "*A la bonne heure!* It always comes at last. What sort of man is he, I wonder, that can charm our Indifferentia?"

They had a very pleasant dinner that evening, and pleasant hours after it by the great wood fire, and Voightel could not have told that Ioris was wishing him deep in a snow-drift, for Ioris was at his gentlest, brightest, and most graceful, and when at midnight they both took leave, accompanied Voightel to his hotel, and pressing both his hands, declared the gratification and honour that he felt in becoming acquainted with the mighty traveller.

"A charming person—beautiful manners and an historic face," thought Voightel; nevertheless he shook his head as he went up the stairs of his hotel.

Voightel was bound for Brindisi, and had only some thirty-six hours to pass in Rome; far away, in those wild untrodden lands which he loved, men, armed to the teeth, were waiting his leadership, and many a problem of unexplored tracks and un-navigated lakes were awaiting his efforts to master them. A great expedition that the governments of three countries had combined to organise, had been put under his command, and he had no time to loiter and read a romance.

Voightel was a scholar, a savant, an explorer and a dweller in deserts, but he was an observer of men, a citizen of the world; he was old and tough, and shrewd and learned, and could be very fierce; his alternate studies of civilised and barbaric life had disposed him to rate simple courage as high as a Lacedæmonian, and to be somewhat deaf and blind to the vast increase in excellencies of all sorts which modern manners claim.

On this subject he was whimsical, and to some hearers, extremely irritating. The more so as no one could deny that he had the amplest experiences of both extremes, which lent to his arguments that authoritative exactitude which exasperates the most patient opponent.

He was exasperating also in many other ways. He had an inconveniently long memory for all kinds of minutæ; no lie imposed on him; and no hypocrisies succeeded with him. What was still more exasperating, he had a stout belief in innocence when he found it, and a profound contempt for the world's general ideas as to vice and virtue.

When Voightel went to bed that night he found a honeyed little note saying that, his impending arrival having been announced in the journals, Mr. and Lady Joan Challoner besought him not to forget the sincerest and most devoted of his friends. Voightel, who was an ungrateful man, or at least everybody said so except those savage tribes whom he adored, twisted the note up, and lit his good-night pipe with it. But in the morning when Voightel had seen the king, a few ministers, and half a hundred archæologists and men of science, he found time to look in at the Casa Challoner, and was met with the most rapturous and cordial welcome, and many heart-rending regrets that he had only half an hour to bestow there.

It was five o'clock, and it chanced to be a Wednesday, and Lady Joan was surrounded by ladies; Voightel was terrible to Mrs. Grundy, because he had horrible ideas as to polygamy, and was also said to have eaten his own cabin-boy in cutlets in the Caribbean Isles.

But the Lady Joan, for once regardless of her *Bona Dea*, received him with an absolute adoration and ecstasy, insisted on his smoking, and pressed on him all the liqueurs ever made upon earth. Such a dear, dear old friend! Could she ever

forget his kindness in those delightful old days in darling Damascus!

Voightel took the petting, sipped the liqueurs, smoked in a circle of dowagers and damsels, and said with genuine good humour, "We don't forget anything about Damascus, do we? What good *très-sec* you used to have, Joan, and how clever Horace Vere was in knocking the heads off the bottles. We used to shoot cats from the roofs, and crows too. You never missed aim in those days. Is your wrist steady now? Pleasant days they were; too pleasant! Poor Jack Seville!"

Lady Joan felt as if some one had poured ice water down her back, and was very effusive and ardent in pressing the liqueurs upon him.

"Just the same woman," thought Voightel, eyeing her; "just the same, only older; of course she's just the same; there are cats and crows here, and champagne; and I suppose dear Robert has a counting-house to be put away in somewhere."

At that moment Ioris entered.

"Io, come and let me present you to the very dearest friend I have in the world—a second father!" cried the Lady Joan.

"We met last night," was on Voightel's lips, but he saw that Ioris bent gravely before him with the ceremonious grace of a perfect stranger. Voightel was old and shrewd; he could see a situation at a glance and guess a great deal in an instant; he seemed not to remember Ioris and felt that Ioris was grateful to him.

"Is he a great friend of yours?" Voightel said aside to Lady Joan. "Ah! as great a friend as Jack Seville? Poor Jack! This man is handsomer; but then you have come into the land of living pictures. Jack only painted 'em."

Lady Joan coloured and winced.

"Mr. Challoner farms Ioris's land," she answered hurriedly. "The Prince is very poor, you know, and Mr. Challoner is very fond of him."

"Challoner was fond of poor Jack and of Horace too," said Voightel, with an innocent meditation. "Good creature your husband always was. So you farm, do you? Does it pay here? Nice country, but not remunerative, is it?"

"We don't do it for profit!" said Lady Joan almost sharply, she felt so sorely tried.

"What it is to live in a poetic country," said Voightel; "but the force of association is everything; when I ate that cabin-boy, whom I hear that admirable lady in a shabby purple gown over there talking about to her neighbour, he was just as agreeable to me as tender veal. It was all the force of association; my hosts liked him as well as veal; better even; so did I. No doubt in Pall-Mall I should hold fried cabin-boy in abhorrence. We are all the puppets of custom; don't you think so, madam?"

The lady in a shabby purple gown, who was Lady George Scrope-Stair, thus suddenly addressed, was too horrified to be able to answer him. ("I have heard him confess the fact myself," said Lady George for ever afterwards.)

"Ah! he was a pretty boy, madam, and we ate him with nutmeg and caper sauce," said Voightel, and rose and took himself away, his hostess following him on to the stairs.

Ioris, under pretext to her of offering him an umbrella, followed him into the street where it was raining a little.

"I did not seem to recognise you just now, my dear Baron," he said, with his sweetest smile, "because the Lady Joan had so often spoken of presenting me to you, that I did not like to deprive her of the pleasure by telling her she had been forestalled. She honours you so greatly."

Voightel looked in his face through his green spectacles.

"I understand," he said drily; they parted with elaborate courtesy on the pavement before the Casa Challoner.

Voightel felt that there was danger impending, and if his caravan had not been chartered, and his Arabs armed to the teeth, and his escort all waiting far away in the sand plains already, he would have stayed in Rome to see the romance unwind itself, and guide its threads if need be.

"A very handsome man, and charming, but weak, I fear," thought Voightel. "Not the man to have the courage of his opinions, I am afraid. I wish he did not act so prettily. I do not like pretty lies. Ugly ones are bad enough. A pretty lie is like poison in a rose; you die in perfume, but you die."

Thereupon he betook himself to the house of Etoile. He had never in his life wished for any tie of the affections, but at that moment he wished that he had been her father, that he might have said—"Beware!"

As it was he dined with her, and felt his way very prudently, being sure of nothing.

"I saw your guest of last night, to-day," he said carelessly, after dinner.

"Yes?"

"Handsome man, very. I saw him at Joan Challoner's."

Etoile was silent.

"He's her friend, isn't he?"

"They are great friends—yes."

Voightel cyeing her sharply, chucked.

"Ah! In a catalogue of their old masters, our beloved Forty Prudes of the London R.A. the other day put down "Portrait of Lady Hamilton, noted for her *friendship* with Nelson." Friendship is such an elastic word. There never was an age when it stood for so many things in private, and was yet so absolutely

non-existent in fact. Our dear Joan has had many such friends, though I don't think one ever let her farm for him before. What are his estates like?"

"They are large, but I should think not very profitable."

"With Joan on them? Probably not."

"Why did you go and see her if you don't like her?"

"My dear, she loves me."

"Then you are very thankless."

Voightel laughed.

"She seems to have grown very proper; admirably proper; she had got muffins and tea. In Damascus days it was champagne and caviare. I reminded her of Damascus days. Retrospection is always so delightful. I think she did not wish the Prince she farms for, to see too much of me. I wonder she lets you give him tea-roses. Oh, a thousand pardons; I meant nothing! Only I fancy my Lady Joan does not love you, and she is nasty when she is crossed. '*C'est un joueur contre qui ne rien perdre c'est beaucoup gagner.*' What was said of Tilly is as true of her. Oh, you need not look so tranquilly scornful, and indeed I suppose you will leave Rome very shortly, will you not? Embittered, is she? Yes, I dare say she may be. It is not nice to marry a Mr. Challoner, and sell teacups, and black Mrs. Grundy's shoes; not nice at all when one was born to better things, and it must naturally sour one. Why do I go and see her? It's the greatest service I can ever do her. It's just the same with her as it is with poor Tartar. Tartar can't say he's traced the Lost Waters and lived in the middle of Africa, with a pat of butter on his head for all his clothing, before *me*, when I left him funkng at the coast, and have worn a pat of butter ten years myself. But for that very reason I dine with Tartar in any city I meet him in, out of pure Christian charity. 'Sharp old Voightel been dining with me,' says Tartar; and people believe then in his pat of butter. 'Dear old Voightel's been dining with me,' says Lady Joan: and then people believe in *hers*. Besides, if one cut all the good-looking women that one knows something about, one would never go out to dinner at all. It's just because I *do* know that she's so thankful to have a chance of being civil to me. And dining out is agreeable after the desert. Though I can live on pulse I have a palate for oysters. Know all about her? To be sure I know all about her. Knew her in short frocks, and used to give her sugar-plums: she spit at me when they weren't big enough. Dear, dear! Archie's daughter ought to have married a duke. How does she stand here? She's only scotched her early mistakes, not killed 'em. No woman ever can kill 'em. *Il n'y a que les morts qui ne reviennent pas*, and ugly stories never die. There's always somebody to keep them alive. Oh, of course she knows that I know every one of her little slips," he

said in conclusion, with that chuckle of grim satisfaction. "She is always delighted to see me, fills my pipe, and brings me the best Chartreuse, and don't lie more than once in ten minutes about her doings in the East and dear old Palmerston. She is talking Platonics and selling pictures now, they tell me: and gets people to believe in both. Dear me! well, the credulity of human nature always was an unknown quantity. She's an artful dodger, our dear Joan, but there—there—one should never say anything."

With which he stretched his legs and sipped his claret comfortably.

"Platonics and pictures," he echoed, with a chuckle. "A charming combination; very popular, I dare say. Bless my soul! I saw Ioris to-day again, as I told you; he did not seem to me to go well with the tea and the tea-cakes. He would have suited our moonlit roofs in Damascus much better. Ah! he'll never get away from *her*, you know. I can see his fate in his face. Jack Seville never would have got away if he hadn't died. The only man to have a chance with her would be a thorough-going bully—a bigger bully than she is. The only law she knows is 'Faustrecht.' But this man's a gentleman, and weak. There's no hope for him. He won't use the fist to her actually, or allegorically. Isn't that a sketch of him over there?"

"Yes."

Etoile was angered to feel herself colour.

Voightel walked over to the easel, and stood there silently; then walked back again.

"Very like a Giorgione or a Titian; very historic face; you ought to paint him in a coat of mail. Lord! if he knew all I could tell him!" Voightel chuckled wickedly in his chair.

"But one should never say anything," he repeated cautiously, hoping that his companion would ask him everything.

But Etoile made no sign: she tried, indeed, to change the conversation. The loyalty of her temperament made her averse to hearing any evil of a woman who still was—at least in Society's sense of the much-tried word—her friend.

Voightel, however, who loved to hear his own tongue, as was natural in a man who spent years in silence amidst unpeopled deserts, and then came back to Europe to have his speech listened to as an oracle's at princes' dinners and in public lecture-rooms—Voightel would not leave the subject, and cheerily puffed out with his smoke all he knew.

Voightel, who declared it was always best to say nothing, said everything, in the usual contrast between theory and practice—said everything, with that chuckle of grim satisfaction with which human nature surveys human frailty; an echo of the laugh that Satan laughed behind the tree, and that Eve heard

and never could forget, and so transmitted to her posterity; the laugh which Gounod has caught in the serenade of the *Dio dell' Or*.

Voightel laughed, with that laugh, as he told his Damascene recollections.

"Why do you take her pipe and her Chartreuse and tell me those things of her? It is unfair and ungenerous," said Etoile, with some disgust and some impatience. To sit still and hear an enemy unjustly dealt with seemed to her an ungenerous meanness. Etoile had the old-fashioned idea that one should be even more scrupulous with a foe than with a friend. The whole theme, too, annoyed her, and made her ill at ease and dissatisfied with herself.

He rose to leave for his night-train for Brindisi; but his eyes were gloomy and troubled through his green spectacles.

"What are you so chivalrous for? The woman is your foe, or will be. My dear, the days of Fontenoy are gone out; everybody nowadays only tries to get the first fire, by hook or by crook. Ours is an age of cowardice and cuirassed cannon: chivalry is out of place in it."

"There can be no reason why she should be ever anything except my friend," said Etoile, with a certain defiance; but she felt that her voice was weak, and her colour changed as Voightel looked at the sketch on the easel.

"Of course, no reason in life," he said drily. "Only Archie and I were fools to send you to her. Well, she is an agreeable woman when she likes. Treat her as such; but keep her at arm's length. If you can buy a thousand francs' worth of lace of her, that will do to trim your maid's nightcaps, do. It will not be dear at the price. You will not be able to sell it again for more than a thousand pence, but it will be cheap at the price. A bowl of milk to a cobra is the better part of valour. It enables you to retreat unmolested. *Méfiez-vous toujours*. But indeed I suppose you and she can never have any quarrel, you are so far apart; you are in the clouds, and she is busy among the steam mills. *Méfiez-vous*: that is all. And remember that she is a handsome woman, and a charming creature, and a dear soul; and, above all, she is Archie's daughter. Ah! that goes so far with so many of us! She is Archie's daughter; but all the same the less seen of her the better. Still, buy the lace—oh, yes—buy the lace; and if you can bring your mind to details, let it be some cotton rubbish off a village priest's surplice, and let her think you think it Doge's point of fifteen hundred. My dear, there is no money better laid out than what is spent in bowls of milk. You don't see it—no, you will never charm snakes, then: you will only get stung by them."

And Voightel rose to go on his way to the lands of the sun;

but as he left her he turned back and held out his hand once more to Etoile with trouble in his keen old eyes.

"*Méfiez-vous!*—remember that—remember that. But I wish I and Archie had not told you to come to her. And I wish you were safe out of Rome. If you *will* stay, buy lace enough, and let her think you could get the French Government to purchase an early master for the Louvre. Oh, my dear, if you are so obstinate that you will not leave the swamp, and so foolhardy that you will not set a bowl of milk, bitten you must be. It is written."

When he left her the tears stood in his old resolute eyes, that would have looked unwinking down the iron tubes of a line of muskets levelled against him.

He felt a vague fear of her future.

She, who had been her own destiny, and never believed in any force of fate or doom of destiny other than lies in the nature we are born with, felt also a dim shapeless apprehension. She sat long, thinking, beside her dying fire.

There are times when even on the bravest temper, the ironical mockery, the cruel despotism of trifling circumstances, that have made themselves the masters of our lives, the hewers of our fate, must weigh with a sense of involuntary bondage, against which to strive is useless.

The weird sisters were forms of awe and magnitude proportionate to the woes they dealt out, to the destiny they wove. But the very littleness of the daily chances that actually shape fate is, in its discordance and its mockery, more truly terrible and more hideously solemn—it is the little child's laugh at a frisking kitten which brings down the avalanche and lays waste the mountain side, or it is the cackle of the startled geese that saves the Capitol.

To be the prey of Atropos was something at the least; and the grim *Deus vult perdere*, uttered in the delirium of pain, at the least made the maddened soul feel of some slender account in the sight of the gods and in the will of heaven. But we, who are the children of mere accident and the sport of idlest opportunity, have no such consolation.

All that Voightel had told her of this woman, whose friendship, as the world calls friendship, she had accepted, weighed on her with oppression and disgust.

"What is it to me?" she thought; and in vain told herself so.

It was much to her, because Ioris had grown to be much. She scarcely knew it, but the pity she felt for him, the sympathy that he had appealed for, drew her heart towards him as it had never been drawn to any mortal creature. The passion of other men had annoyed, revolted, or wearied her, but his, speaking only

as yet in his eyes and his voice, approaching her with soft hesitation, with a tender and almost timid grace, stole on her unawares and did not alarm her.

Ioris, swift to read all women, and incredulous of good faith in them, was perplexed, and yet impressed by the possibilities of passion, and the absolute absence of it, which he detected in her. Something of the exultation and the pride of an unparalleled conquest could, he felt, be the boast of the man who should become her lover.

“He was the first that ever burst into that silent sea.”

It would be like that Norse king's triumphant joy when the sharp prow cut through untraversed waters, and his sight ranged over untrodden shores.

He had made her first grow used to him and to his presence near her.

With the noonday chimes of the churches and convents of Rome she had been almost sure from the first days of their acquaintance to hear the door unclose and his voice ask, “*Peut-on entrer?*” with the soft gladness in it of one who is sure that he is welcome.

Those sunny winter mornings; the dreamy smell of the burning pines; the blue sky, beyond the window panes; the clusters of hot-house bloom full of soft colour; the vague sense of exhilaration and of languor which the Roman air carries in it—she rose to them all every day with the sweetest sense of happiness that had ever touched her life. They were all blent together confusedly and fragrantly, like her flowers in their baskets of moss. The days were soft and radiant, and she awoke to each with a new joy in her heart, that she thought was born of the new air and the new light, and of the immemorial earth around.

The first awakening of the artist in Italy is like the sudden blowing of a flower. All previous life seems but as a trance, sad-coloured and heavy with monotony. All that were hueless dreams before, take form and colour, and the vaguest ideals all at once grow real. The hunger of the desire of the mind ceases, and a dreamy, ethereal content steals like music on a south wind over the intelligence, which ceases to question and accepts and enjoys.

Man never seems so great nor God so near, nor mortal life so infinite, as here.

The immensity of the past serves to heighten the charm of the present. The very flower of human achievement has blossomed here from the tree of life. Beside the Sun God unscathed through two thousand years, Art ceases to seem vain. Beside the eternal well-spring of Egeria's fountain, passion may cheat itself into faith that it is immortal.

Art is strewn broadcast in the common ways, as the red tulips, as the purple-capped anemones strew the common pastures; and passion is in the air, in the light, in the wind; it is in every burden of song down the still dark ways of the city, and in every shadow that falls on the lustrous white sheen of the fruit-scented fields. In other lands love may be an accident of life: in Italy it is life itself.

Now the breath of passing love-fancies which dulls the mirror of most women's souls had never passed over her. She had lived, so far as all love went, as untouched as any mountain flower that blows where no steps of men have ever wandered. Her heart was like a deep unruffled lake.

Passion must be remembered to be known, as the sun must be seen.

Men had wooed her with passion, sparing no pains. But a thousand lovers whom she rejects will teach a woman nothing. If they cannot waken her soul, or her senses, she will escape from them as ignorant and as emotionless as though she had dwelt all her days in a desert isle. One day there will come a touch which will tell her all; but till that comes she remains ignorant, because unmoved. The woman who has a hundred lovers, but who has not loved, is like a child that is blind. They tell her the sun is there, and she thinks she knows what manner of glory the sun's is. But, in truth, she knows nothing. She sits in the dark, and plays with vain imaginings, like the sightless child. She may pity the pain of a wasted passion, that is all. The pity which is not born from experience is always cold. It cannot help being so. It does not understand.

"You know nothing of love," Voigtel had said to her one day years before in Paris. "It is very strange, you, whom all the world thinks have had such a *jeunesse orangeuse*, and whom so many men are willing to adore—you know no more of it than that white gardenia flower in your girdle."

"Except in theory," she answered him. "I have read so much of it. It is the theme of the world——"

"Read!" echoed the old wise man with scorn. "Oh, child, what use is that? Read!—the inland dweller reads of the sea, and thinks he knows it, and believes it to be as a magnified duck-pond, and no more. Can he tell anything of the light and the shade; of the wave and the foam; of the green that is near, of the blue that is far; of the opaline changes, now pure as a dove's throat, now warm as a flame; of the great purple depths and the fierce blinding storm; and the delight and the fear, and the hurricane rising like a horse snorting for war, and all that is known to the man who goes down to the great deep in ships? Passion and the sea are like one another. Words shall not tell them, nor colour pourtray them. The kiss that burns, and

the salt spray that stings—let the poet excel and the painter endeavour, yet the best they can do shall say nothing to the woman without a lover, and the landsman who knows not the sea. If you would live—love. You will live in an hour a lifetime; and you will wonder how you bore your life before. But as an artist all will be over with you—that I think.”

CHAPTER XXV.

As Etoile sat by her fire, and the train bore Voightel southward and eastward through the snow, Ioris ascended the stairs of his prison-house.

It was ten o'clock; there was a ball for which his escort was commanded; he was dressed for the evening, some orders hung at his button-hole. His own sentiments were disregarded as to his orders.

“Decorations are out of place at private houses,” he had constantly urged; “they should only be worn at courts and embassies. I assure you, *ma chère*, that anywhere else they are vulgar.”

“Put them on when you go with *me*,” said the Lady Joan sharply. She knew her own spheres and orbits better than he did: the bankers and consuls’ wives, the small gentilities, and the freeborn republicans, and all Shoddy in general, are very much impressed by any decorations.

The Lady Joan was alone when he entered, and was lying on her sofa. Mr. Challoner was sleeping the sleep of the just in an after-dinner doze in his own little room.

“How late you are, Io!” she cried, and lifted herself, and threw her arm about his throat.

He yielded, and felt ashamed.

His heart smote him for a sort of unfaithfulness. But it was not to her that he felt faithless.

“Why didn’t you come to dinner?” she asked him, caressing his silky dark hair. “Robert was as cross as a bear. You get very uncertain now. What do you do with yourself?”

“I have to be much oftener at the Court, and I spend so much time in that weary Messina Bureau,” said Ioris, and he sank down on a low stool, and leaned his forehead on her knee. He felt weary, out of tune, impatient of himself and her. He felt a coward, and untrue.

Nevertheless, she was alone; the lamps burned low; the instincts of long habit were strong with him.

This passion had become a habit, and when passion and habit long lie in company it is only slowly and with incredulity that habit awakes to find its companion fled, itself alone.

The clock ticked on, the hours went by; she was happy, and he did not care to realise that he was false.

Midnight came. She left him to go to her room and change her attire, and came back radiant with black-and-gold woven Eastern stuffs and a train of amber silk, and bade him clasp her bracelets, and bade him see if the diamond spilla were set right in her braids.

"It's one o'clock. Let's be off, dear!" she said as she thrust her hand into a glove; and he brought her satin cloak, and wrapped her up in it.

They went together through the quiet house and down the dusky stairs. Mr. Challoner was still sleeping the sleep of the just, but by this time he was not in his den, but on his bed.

The jar of the closing house-door woke him; he turned comfortably, and thought how glad he was *he* had not to go out in the snow to a ball.

Their cab joined the long string of slowly-creeping carriages, and in due time they were set down, and went together into the palace, with its modern upholstery all ablaze with wax lights, and very much like a transformation scene in a pantomime, with its pink-tinted lamps and its paradise of palms.

This great ball was being given at the Anglo-American bankers', the Maescrips, who were very rich people, and always spent ten thousand francs on the flowers, and said aloud that they did so.

It was not the highest society that went to the Maescrips, but it was a kind of society that Lady Joan enjoyed very much better than the highest; a society that was reverential to her because she was a Perth-Douglas, that believed all she said about dear old Palmerston or anybody else, and did not call in question her knowledge of the Arts—a society in which she could waltz all night, and talk about "Io," and feel that she was Somebody—as she never could feel with Princess Vera's contemptuous gaze on her, or under the inquisition of Lady Cardiff's eye-glasses.

She went up the crowded stairs and into the reception-room with Ioris behind her, and Mrs. Maescrip, who was a very censorious and particular little person, received her with delight.

"So kind of you! But where's dear Mr. Challoner? Is he not coming?"

"He's not very well to-night, but I've brought Io," said the Lady Joan, nodding to a dozen acquaintances.

"Delighted—too kind of you—*charmée de vous voir, Prince!*"

said Mrs. Macscrip, amidst a tide of incoming people that surged about her like sea-waves.

"*Toujours votre serviteur !*" murmured Ioris, with his perfect bow, that had been admired at Frohsdorff, at Vienna, and at the Court of Petersburg; and then followed the Lady Joan's black-and-amber fan-shaped skirts, which were as a beacon from whose rays he must not stray.

She plunged into the delights of the evening, and he bore the weariness of it as well as he could.

He never danced. She danced all night. It was very tiresome to him to wade through the crush and heat of the thronged rooms, with the noise of the band or the tongues of the chatters, always dinning in his ear. He had been to so many of these things; alone, he would not have been amused amidst this mixed and second-rate society, but alone, he could at least have gone after leaning in a doorway twenty minutes. With her no such escape was possible.

To hold her fan, to offer his arm, to bow five hundred times, to murmur "*Comme vous êtes belle !*" to women he though hideous, to say "*Enchanté de vous trouver !*" to bores he met every day; to be always at hand if she wanted to go and get an ice, or to see the lamp-lit garden, or to cross the room to a friend's sofa—these were his alternate diversions for six mortal hours. It was a tedious martyrdom. He envied Mr. Challoner at home and asleep.

The sun was up when at last it pleased her to get into a cab and bid him light her a cigarette.

"You've been as dull as ditchwater all night, Io," she said as she took it; "and how pale you are! Now look at *me*. I'm as fresh as paint."

He went home once more to his own house by the break of day and threw himself on his bed, to court in vain the heavy slumber of morning. He was unhappy, and his conscience was ill at ease, and he could not lull it to rest with sophisms.

"*Avoir menti, c'est avoir souffert. N'être jamais soi, faire illusion toujours, c'est une fatigue. Etre caressant, se retenir, se réprimer, toujours être sur le qui-vive, se guetter sans cesse, chatouiller le poignard, sucrer le poison, veiller sur la rondeur de son geste et la musique de sa voix, ne pas avoir un regard—rien n'est plus difficile, rien n'est plus douloureux.*"

So wrote a great master; and so suffered Ioris.

In the early days of an illicit passion concealment is charming; every secret stairway of intrigue has a sweet surprise at its close; to be in conspiracy with one alone against all the rest of humanity is the most seductive of seductions. Love lives best in this soft twilight, where it only hears its own heart and one other's beat in the solitude.

But when the reverse of the medal is turned; when every step on the stairs has been traversed and tired of, when, instead of the heart's beat, there is but an upbraiding voice, when it is no longer *with* one but *from* one that concealment is needed, then the illicit passion is its own Nemesis, then nothing were ever drearier, wearier, more anxious, or more fatiguing than its devious paths become, and they seem to hold the sated wanderer in a labyrinth of which he knows, and knowing hates, every wind, and curve, and coil, yet out of which it seems to him he will never make his way back again into the light of wholesome day.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THAT same night that the Lady Joan drew her yellow skirts though the ballroom crowds, and drew her lover behind it, to the admiration and approbation of all who beheld her, a sledge, furiously driven, was crossing one of the vast level tracks of Russia in the teeth of a storm of snow and wind.

For hour after hour there was no break in the wide white track save when, at some wretched group of hovels or some small walled hamlet, the steaming and half-frantic horses were changed. The frozen plains stretched all around, dotted here and there by the black stems of stunted pines. The snow fell ceaselessly. Now and then through the roar of the wind there came as the wind lulled for a moment the sound of a wolf-pack baying afar off. The sledge went on, the horses tore their way through drift and hurricane.

Every now and then a voice from within cried into the bitter air, "Faster! faster! for the love of heaven!" The voice was feeble and feverish.

"We had better stop, Fedorivanovitch," urged a stronger voice tenderly; but the other always answered, "No, no—on! on!"

And the voice was obeyed, for it had the sound of death in it.

The road was lost sight of; all tracks were obliterated; even the burning oil in the lamps was frozen; the snow fell always. The horses were urged onwards in the dark, for the night was black, though the world was white. Verst upon verst was covered of that horrible, silent highway. The baying of wolves

was heard nearer. The wind whirled the falling snow round and round in endless gyrations. It was a night when men die like frozen sheep.

Still the feeble voice within cried always, "No, no—on! on!" and it was obeyed. The glimmer of dull lights at length grew near, and showed where one more posting station was.

"It is time," muttered the driver, for he knew that in another half-hour his good beasts would fall to rise no more. He flogged them onward towards that faint light; the snow ceased for a little while to fall; the bay of the pack behind them grew distant once more.

"The Father be praised!" said the driver as he pulled his horses up half-dead before the cluster of miserable dwellings.

It was in the middle of the night, but there were people awake. The postmaster came out with a lantern into the cold, which was enough to freeze every living thing. Through the open door, from which the snow was cleared, the light of a lamp streamed. A servant got down from the sleigh.

"Hold the light here," he said, with an ashen face.

"Is he worse?" said the driver, leaving his quivering beasts for a moment. The man snatched the lantern and held it so that he could see into the interior of the tarantass.

"Dear God!" he cried, with a great shout.

Then, trembling with another tremor than that of cold, he tore away the furs and wraps. The post people saw the form of a young man. The head was sunk upon the breast; from the breast blood had oozed out over the costly furs and frozen there.

"He has but swooned, he has but swooned!" the people cried. The driver added, "Only half an hour ago he was crying to me to go faster."

"The night is death!" cried the servant, beside himself. "It is Fedorivanovitch Souroff. Help me carry him within—quick! quick! quick!"

A dozen stout arms aided him to lift his master from the sleigh. He was quite a young man, of singular beauty, and he wore the uniform of the Cuirassiers of the Guard; his face was without colour, his lips scarcely breathed; blood still oozed from his chest and froze as the outer air reached it.

"His wound has broken out afresh!" cried the servant, and wept as children weep.

They carried his master within the posting-house and laid him down on the skins and rugs of his sledge on the floor by the warmth of the stove.

It was a poor, miserable place; but the people were kind from pity and sorrow, not merely from respect for the sword, and for a great noble's name. Women were crying; they

brewed hot tea quickly; they prayed to their saints; they did what they knew.

"But on such a night to be out," they cried, "with a wound! it is death."

"It is death," said his servant. "But he was in such haste to reach Petersburg he would have no delay. What can we do—what can we do? Is there a surgeon?"

There was none nearer than at a town they named lying many versts away.

The officer meanwhile was dying. He had never moved since they had laid him there upon the black bearskins from his sleigh; his head had fallen back, his eyes were closed; the drops of tea they tried to force through his teeth only wetted his lips; they had torn his linen open and his shirt, but they could not staunch the blood. It flowed sluggishly, feebly, but it flowed always, and looked dark and clotted. It came from the lungs.

He had been wounded, by a spear, six weeks before, in the chest.

The people stood round him appalled, silent, helpless; the women sobbed; his servant kneeled beside him. Without, the snow fell and the winds howled and the wolves. The dull yellow rays of the lamp fell on the pallid and delicate beauty of his face.

Suddenly his eyes opened wide, he stretched his arms out, he gazed with heartsick yearning into the circle of strange faces that were about his death-bed.

"Dorotea!" he cried aloud, and his hands felt the empty air feebly as for some beloved thing they sought to touch.

"Dorotea!" he cried once more.

Then he fell back exhausted; the blood gushed with a quicker current from his breast; he sighed once—wearily—and then was dead.

* * * * *

"That is the name of the woman he loved," said the soldier that was both his servant and his foster-brother. "I have a written packet to take to her, his cross for his mother, his sword for the Tzar. It is a singing woman that he loved. Perhaps she is singing now, and he lies dead."

* * * * *

She was singing—in the *Roméo and Giulietta* of Gounod, in the Opera House of St. Petersburg. It was a great night, by Imperial command. The Court was present in all its brilliancy, and not even the presence of the Tzar could restrain the delirium of the overflowing house. Never before, so they vowed, had the beauty of Dorotea Coronis been so great or her marvellous voice so divine. In her white robes, in the balcony scene,

with the diamonds in her hair and on her breast, her supreme loveliness vanquished even the magic of her voice. She was so beautiful that for some moments the volleys of applause welcomed only her beauty, and would not let her voice be heard. They adored the scene, and forgot the singer. She was the rival of herself.

Then, when at last silence came and let her voice be heard, that seemed like a lark's to lose itself in the very heights of heaven, the hushed and breathless crowds forgot her beauty and believed that they listened to the angels.

She had had many a night of triumph; many a night when great theatres had rung with the thunders of a people's homage, and a multitude beside itself with rapture had thrust her horses from the shafts and drawn her to her home. But no night had perhaps ever equalled this one.

When the opera was ended Imperial gifts were brought to her in the choicest shapes that jewels could be found to take, and crowns and wreaths and clusters of flowers, all holding some gem of price, covered her dressing-chamber with their costly lumber.

When she left the Opera House the whole city seemed in commotion. It was a white city, for it was still midwinter; but a million lights sparkled everywhere above the snow. A brilliant guard was escorting the Imperial carriages; there was a guard also for herself—a volunteer guard of many of the highest gentlemen of the land, bearing torches and shouting *vivats* in her honour. They ran with her to her house, a brilliant medley of fantastic figures, wrapped in furs and waving torches. The thunder of their plaudits rang up to the clear steel-hued sky of the North, where the stars were shining, so intense in their brilliancy that they seemed to pierce the frozen air with spears of light. Across one-half the heavens, also, there was outspread in all its wonder the rose-red rays and golden flames of the aurora borealis.

"Oh, the night of nights!" cried in ecstasy the old Spanish woman who had never left her since she first had sung in Seville.

Dorotea Coronis did not answer; she sat before her mirror, with her hands listlessly clasped, weary and silent. What was triumph to her? A story stale and without power to charm. What use were all the voices of earth adoring her? She only longed to hear one that was never now upon her ear.

"Oh, my love, my love! oh, my soul!" she had said in her heart all the while that the flood of song had poured from her lips, and she had seen nothing of the great throngs that listened to her, nothing of the deluge of light and the sea of faces; she had only seen in memory the eyes of Fédor.

A great supper waited for her, where princes were the hosts, in a very bower of camellias and roses that gold had made bloom whilst the Neva was ice and the whole land was snow; but she sent word that she was unwell, and sat alone in her chamber, disrobed, with her loose hair hanging over her, whilst the aurora burned in the midnight skies, and the old Spaniard, crouching in the threshold, told her beads.

There was a little open casket before her; there were letters in it—nothing but letters, and one lock of a man's fine fair hair.

She read all the letters one by one from first to last, as she had read them a thousand times. The first were a mere few formal lines of such courtesy as strangers pay; the others, eloquent utterances of an absorbing passion, now alive with hope, now desolate with despair; the last, words that made light of a spear-wound received in a mountain skirmish, and that burned with a love that made all physical pain indifferent, nay, unfelt.

"You call me cold," she thought as she read. "Oh, my love! oh, my soul! you do not know. What were the world's scorn, the world's shame to *me*—the vile world that harbours the prostitute and the pander in its high places, and hugs a lie and all that speak one? The world! that stones innocence like a poor dog called mad, and kisses the clay foot of any gilded sin! What were the world to me? Think you I would not welcome the worst that it could do to me to buy one hour with you? But, my love, my soul, I want to save you from myself. Oh, God! give me strength to be strong, to 'be cold,' to bear your reproach, to bear your pain! Mother of Christ, give me strength to keep you free—it is for you—for you—for you!"

Then she warmed the letters in her breast as if they were the pale cheeks of some little ailing child, and clasped them to her, and rocked herself to and fro wearily, as one whose burden was greater than her force.

The door of her chamber unclosed without the sound reaching her ear; with a noiseless step her husband entered and approached her, seeing in the mirror before her the letters clasped to her bosom, the white grief of her bowed face, the great tears that stole one by one from under her closed eyelids.

He stretched his hand over her shoulder and, with a clutch as chill and hard as though his hand was in a glove of steel, he grasped the letters that lay in her bare breast.

Then the Duc de Santorin smiled.

"We have wanted these a long time, my lawyers and I," he said slowly. "You will have no more like them, madame. Your lover is dead!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

IORIS awoke very weary in the morning.

He had slept but little, and that feverishly.

The shrill shrieks, and yells, and whooping cries of the maskers scare sleep from all eyes on the last nights of Carnival in Rome.

With sunrise the maskers had gone to their homes, worn out with noisy riot and rapture, the sun came tenderly in through the orange boughs by his casement; some robins were singing on the window-sill; but he awoke feverish and depressed, and turned from the waking smile of the day.

“N’es-tu pas mien,
Ah ! Je vois que tu m’aimes bien,
Tu rougis quand je te regarde,”

he murmured, as he closed his eyes against the light, as the old words of the poet, dead nearly three centuries ago, drifted through his misty thoughts. It was not the woman whose yellow skirts he had followed through the close crowds of the ball-room that recalled these tender old words to his memory as he awoke.

Then he remembered with a shudder that it was Fat Tuesday, last day of carnival, last night of masquerade.

His friend loved the roar and the riot of carnival; she was at the height of her happiness, throned in a break, disguised, and with wire vizard, flinging the showers of chalk over the crowd, and sustaining the duel of the sweetmeats with the balconies. There was a robust vigour of insatiable enjoyment in her throughout the mad pranks of those headlong frolics, which once had attracted, which now disgusted him. She herself paid little heed whether he were disgusted or attracted; he was hers, as much as the live bird tied to her bouquet.

She donned her wire mask and her costume, Turkish, Chinese, Moyen-âge, or what not, and amused herself with that zest in the masquerade which made her as boisterous and gleeful as any lad of fifteen summers. The noisy, dusty, riotous, shrieking pandemonium was paradise to her, and woe betide him if he had not his carriage ready at her door, with its steeds pranked out in fooling guise and its cushions laden with confetti and flowers.

He rose to this weary duty with a sigh. In days of boyhood he had loved well enough the merriment and graceful mummeries of carnival, which then had been full of a colour and a light which have now passed for ever away from the carnival as

from the world; now it seemed to him, both he and the world had grown grave and fatigued, and could never any more shake their joy-bells without effort.

Lady Joan did not care what he felt or did not feel; she sent him word to mind and be ready at three o'clock.

He bade his servant see that the break and the horses were ready, and then went out of the house to the house of Etoile.

She was so used to see him there by noonday that she only looked up with a smile as he entered, and went on with a study she was painting.

He looked at it quickly: it was his own portrait.

"Go in the light, yonder," she said to him, without answering his glad rapid words of surprise. "I made this study from memory; I want to finish it. I shall call it Hamlet."

"Hamlet! And why?"

"Because you are very like Hamlet; you will never be sure of what you wish——"

"I am only too sure of what I wish," said Ioris, almost inaudibly, and his eyes dwelt on her with a sombre passion in them that, like a magnetism, drew up her own regard to his.

She looked a moment, then shuddered a little, and grew pale.

He kissed her left hand as it hung by her side, and kept it in his own.

In the silence they could hear the beating of each other's hearts.

The servant threw open the door, and they started as if they were guilty. He left her side quickly, and went and stood by the hearth. An old German musician had entered, a little feeble old man, unknown to fame, but who had all the music of his country at his fingers' ends, and in his heart and soul.

"You bade me bring you the Passion Musik of the sublime Bach," he said, with the humble fond look at her as of a dog to the only creature kind to him. The old man knew, heard, saw nothing but his music.

With a timid salutation to Ioris, whom he did not know, he shambled to the grand piano standing in the shadow, and ran his hands over it and began to play unbidden. The solemn, tender, mystic melodies filled the room with their power.

She motioned to Ioris to stay where he was, and continued her painting. The light fell on his delicate features, thoughtful and mysterious, like the heads of Bronzino's and the old Florentine painters' portraits: the odours of the jonquils and hyacinths were in the air, sweet and tranquil as peace; the music stole softly from the distant shadows, where the musician played on unseen, unwitting of the flight of time.

Ioris was unhappy, yet content; unquiet, yet lulled to a

dreamy repose. Etoile was very pale, and her hand, as it moved, had lost its firm, unerring mastery, and trembled ever so little. Yet, when their eyes met across the sunlight and the heads of the flowers, they were both happy.

They did not need words; the music was the fittest interpreter of both their hearts.

Two o'clock rang from the bells without.

Both started to think that time had flown thus by them unnoted. They had scarcely spoken, yet the hour was, perhaps, the sweetest of both their lives and the purest of his. Never afterwards could one of them, at least, hear the music of those themes without the hot tears rushing to her eyes, and that short sweet serene hour returning to her like "remembered kisses after death."

Two o'clock rang, and struck from clock, and bells, and Princess Vera sent a message begging that she would not forget to come to her balcony in an hour's time.

"The Corso!" said Etoile, in impatience, and turned the wet panel with his portrait on it to the wall.

The Corso!

Ioris remembered his tyrant.

"I, too, must go to the Corso," he said, with a restless sigh.

She did not ask with whom; she did not even look at him. He took his leave whilst the old German still played on through the sad intricate melodies of Schumann and Chopin.

He went out of her presence serener, happier, with the melodies about him like the very breath of religion, and the fragrance of the flowers seeming to follow him in symbol of a pure soul opened to his gaze and touch.

He went, and drove the horses to the Casa Challoner; and down the stairs came his mistress, masked, and with a spangled domino. Behind her were Guido Serravalle as a trovatore, with his guitar, and Douglas Græme as a Louis Treize mousquetaire, and all with tin shovels in their hands to bespatter the crowd with their chalk.

"You look as dull as a grave-digger, Io. Why didn't you dress up in something?" said the Lady Joan, as she tossed him a mask on her doorstep; she gave a piercing carnival yell, and jumped into the break; young Guido strummed his guitar, Mimo ran up puffing and breathless, fat and absurd, clad as a Condottière, and banging the step with his sword; the Count di Sestri, stately and elegant, dressed as Cesare Borgia in azure and white, came also.

"En route!" cried the Lady Joan, with rapture, and they rolled away, soon mixed with the jostling press of carriages and cars, maskers and mummers, under the white clouds of the flying chalk.

Ioris, all the dreary hours through, looked up at the brilliant balcony of the Princess Vera, but he did not see Etoile there. He was glad.

The Corso over, ending with its fairy war of the Moccololetti, till a sea of fire sparkled from the Porta del Popolo to the Reprisa dei Barberi, they went to dinner in a private room at Spillmann's, a very gay, noisy, and costly dinner, that lasted long, and thence, at midnight, the Lady Joan slipping into a black domino instead of a spangled one, as a snake slips its skin, passed to the Veglione.

He was not relieved from his attendance on her until four o'clock on the following morning, when, tired for once, and hoarse from screaming in falsetto through her mask, she consented to leave the crowded foyer and go home.

Ioris did not go home. He walked about the quiet streets in the clear crisp air, as the grey in the sky showed the breaking day, and went far out of his way to pass the old palace on the Montecavallo.

"She has been asleep all these hours," he thought, and looked up at the dark grated casements which shut in the sleep of Etoile.

How horrible it seemed to him that a woman could grin and scream and riot through the day and night, and give and take the veiled indecencies and salacious jests of that masked motley mob of the masquerade at the Apollo!

Some gardeners were entering the Colonna gardens. He entered with them, and dropped down on the bench where he had found Etoile sitting a few days before.

Day was breaking over the vastness of Rome, outspread in its greyness and calm beneath.

He looked at it till the tears rose in his eyes and dimmed his sight, as the light of dawn trembled over the city.

"Oh, the things that I dreamt in my youth!" he thought: and his heart was sick; for he felt that his youth and his dreams might all have resurrection, but at the gates of the grave where they were buried a dread shape stood, and barred the way; and the spectre was the ghost of a dead passion.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MEANWHILE Mr. Challoner, who was a virtuous man and did not go to masked balls, and was a wise man and let no spectres rise to him, was having a cup of tea comfortably in bed; after that he had a cold bath, the morning papers, an interview with his little girl and the governess, and then proceeded at a leisurely pace through the streets, across the water, to a certain grim old mansion in the centre of the Trastevere, and towards one of the many doors that opened on its grimy wide staircase of stone, a door that had been made out of keeping with its surroundings by modern additions of plate glass and brass plates, and bore on it in conspicuous letters:—"Società Italiana-Inglese del Ponte Calabrese-Siciliano," and had underneath this inscription:—"Bureau della Direzione."

When Mr. Challoner had mounted the grimy staircase and had passed the modernised door, he was generally very happy, even happier than when with his little girl and her governess.

To begin with, he was a director, a thing which he always liked being. The word director had an important, responsible, pompous kind of sound that was balm to him; he had been a singularly unlucky man, but the word director always blinded him to this fact—it has a successful sound about it; in spite of the innumerable bubbles and awful earthquakes that it too often heralds, the word director always sounds like wealth and public esteem. But sweeter, even than for this, was his office desk to Mr. Challoner, because it symbolised all his substitutes for that more vulgar vengeance which ignorant men wondered he had never taken on Ioris.

Ioris was wearied and impatient of this speculation into which he had been beguiled.

Things were going wrong; all these dreary and complicated troubles into which he had been drawn were each day knitting themselves tighter and more intricately.

Mr. Challoner had a knack of making things go wrong quite unintentionally: on the banks of Orontes and Euphrates they had gone so wrong that hundreds and thousands and even millions of pounds, and the whole name and fame of a very fine business, had tumbled into those historic rivers and been seen no more.

"*A mauvais jeu bonne mine*," said Mr. Challoner, and the more unfortunate he was, the more imperturbably did he set his

unchangeable countenance in a stern and blank repose, off which it was impossible for anybody to take any diagnosis of any of his feelings, and begin to play again with shares for his cards, and the round world for his roulette wheel. It was in a very small way indeed, but it was as sweet to him as if he had been a Rothschild. His wife enjoyed selling a cracked tea-cup, and he enjoyed floating an obscure company. He had not succeeded in anything, and in all probability never would, but that did not interfere with his enjoyment.

If he had gone out in a wintry dawn, and shot at Ioris, it would have been uncomfortable and unsatisfactory: even if he had seen Ioris lying dead on the turf it would not have pleased him particularly; he was a slow-blooded and humane person; but to see the money of Ioris dropped down into bottomless abysses of speculation, and the honour of Ioris imperilled in hastily and ignorantly assumed responsibilities, did please him a little in a sluggish sort of way, and made him smile when he was safely shut up alone, examining Ioris's signatures, in the Bureau of the Messina Bridge. It was a vengeance much more appropriate to his era than the shot in the wintry dawn would have been.

Mr. Challoner was essentially a man of his time. He could pocket all affronts, and conceal all resentments; he could turn pompous placid phrases when his veins were turning cold in wrath; he could enter a drawing-room behind his wife and Ioris, and endure imperturbably the smile of the drawing-room crowd; but he was human, nevertheless, and when he saw the fortunes of his wife's friend dropping—dropping—dropping into the Sicilian sands and seas, he smiled. Mr. Challoner knew by experience that curses may come home again, *but* money never does. Mr. Challoner would sit at his desk in this large and ancient palace that held the Messina offices, and count up columns of figures, and feel content—so content that when his wife would call for him in the twilight, as she did sometimes, he would say quite good-humouredly, and he was not a good-humoured man—“And Ioris—is Ioris with you, my love?”

Yet in this, the fourth season of its commercial existence, the bridge at the Straits of Messina could not be said to be a success; indeed, it had stopped short at its very commencement. The piles were there in the sand for anybody who liked to look at them, but they could not be said to advance traffic, and they did not satisfy the shareholders.

It costs a good deal of money to drive piles into sand, and a good many millions of francs were driven in with them, and the crabs ran in and out the piles, and the waves washed them, but there was no bridge to be seen in the soft ambient air spanning the waters. To be sure there was always the bridge upon paper,

in the clearest and most colossal designs that could delight the soul of any engineer; and the engineers said that the piles in the sand were all that could be reasonably expected from the number of years and the number of millions. But everybody is not an engineer to understand this, and the shareholders were not satisfied; indeed, whenever are shareholders satisfied?

If you give them ten per cent. and a bonus, they are frightened: they think you are going too fast; if you give them nothing at all, and make them pay up, they are equally frightened, and rush and sell out and ruin you and themselves.

There are only the swine at Gadara that ever could equal shareholders in silliness, so the Lady Joan said; but she was not herself very angry when the shares of the Messina Bridge dropped from zenith to zero; she was quite good-tempered about it; she was only a promoter, not a shareholder, and sensibly said that you cannot expect colossal works to be rattled off in a day.

Into the sand and the sea, with the piles, however, had gone a good deal of money, not of hers. "I'm too poor to put money in; I can only give 'em my brains," she always said pleasantly in all affairs of the kind. But Ioris *had* put his money in, allured by those fair white parchment designs with all the engineers' lines and dots and figures; and when he went down to the Gulf of Faro, and looked over the blue serene sea where the bridge should have been, and was not, his heart sank as lead would have sunk in the sea. And his heart smote him too, thinking of those shareholders whom in all innocence and good faith he had so unhappily helped to mislead; and he could not laugh when the Lady Joan called them his Gadarene swine.

Mr. Challoner did smile, as far as the rigidity of his countenance could ever be said to do so.

He had been a shepherd of the sheep that were as silly as swine, and had been well-paid to be a shepherd, and could sit at his handsome desk in the old palace where the bureau was, serenely and without responsibility.

It was only Ioris that was responsible.

The bridge by the Gulf of Faro was one of those doomed enterprises which open like a blaze of fireworks on a king's birthday, and in a little while leave but some charred sticks and some burnt fingers to the darkness of the night. Its fate was written, and its name was ruin.

Even if ever it were to get built, no commerce could ever for centuries to come be enough to repay its gigantic cost. And it never would get built: the seas and the winds forbade it.

"Who ever said it would be built?" cried Lady Joan, in irritation at the simplicity of Ioris when he was surprised and pained at this. "Who ever said it would be built? We proposed to try and build it. That is quite another thing."

When he did not see the difference, she told him he was a fool. To propose is lucrative: to build is not so.

Ioris, whose imagination had been taken captive with brilliant fancies of reviving the old commerce between Africa and Italy, of opening up the old highways of the seas and bringing within easy reach the vast untouched riches of the great isles—Ioris was inconsolable, and full of bitter anxieties as the months and the years slipped by and brought no nearer the realisation of those splendid schemes that had glittered so brilliantly on paper and parchment.

He saw no return for his money nor for that of all the tens of thousands of shareholders embarked in it. He saw continual expenditure: that was all. The public history of the bridge of Faro was like the private history of the land at Fiordelisa.

Meantime, to Mr. Challoner both the public and the private history were matters of grim and tranquil diversion.

"Wrath is a terrible impiety, quite an impiety," said Mr. Challoner, furling his umbrella in the offices that afternoon when his day's labours were done, for on his road thither that morning, meeting an acquaintance in the street, he had heard with regret that Baron Chemnitz and the Marquis Cardello had met in a fatal encounter on the dreary lands of a Flemish frontier town, and that Cardello was dead, and his adversary dying. Mr. Challoner, furling his umbrella, felt a compassion tinged with contempt for both the combatants.

What good did dying do?

Mr. Challoner looked at Ioris's signatures lying on his desk, and having made his umbrella quite smooth, went out into the street again contentedly.

"So the Baron has killed Cardello, and is shot through the lungs himself?" said another acquaintance that he met, and then stopped embarrassed, fearing Mr. Challoner might have some fellow-feeling; but Mr. Challoner had none.

He was very sorry for both, he said, very; and more sorry still for Society.

And he undid the beautifully-neat umbrella as a few drops fell from the clouds, and went onwards. All the world was talking of the tragedy that had closed the great Chemnitz scandal in the darkness of death.

Mr. Challoner pursued his tranquil way home to the Temple of All the Virtues, and as the sounds of his wife's guitar struck on his ear, put his umbrella in the rack, and looked at the sables of Ioris hanging on the coat-stand of the anteroom, then he shook his head and smiled grimly. He shook his head for Baron Chemnitz, he smiled for himself.

On the other side of the oriental silk curtains his wife and Ioris were speaking of the tragedy.

"Alas! that poor woman!" said Ioris, absently, thinking of the lost and lonely creature for whose sake these men had perished.

Lady Joan, who was tired after the masking of the day and night, struck a chord of her *chitarra* and laughed, as she lay full length on her sofa.

"How could she be such a fool!"

Mr. Challoner entered the room and went up to the sofa, staring hard through his eyeglasses, not seeing, or not willing to see, the heavy frown on his wife's brows.

"There is bad news from the Straits, Ioris," he said without preface, and began to extract letters, papers, and telegraphic despatches from his pocket.

The face of Ioris, pale and weary already, grew paler.

Mr. Challoner thought of Baron Chemnitz lying dying with the air whistling through his pierced lungs, thought of him certainly with regret and pity, because he had been so great a headstone of the commercial world; but still with contempt—the contempt of a superior person.

"Very bad news," he said with a sigh. "I fear we shall lose;—well, I dare not say how much we shall lose—read these letters."

Now, "we" was a figure of speech; the vague, metaphorical, much-beloved pronoun hourly in use at the Casa Challoner and at Fiordelisa; a mere figure of speech, because though Mr. Challoner was a shepherd, the gold of Ioris had gathered together this flock that was more silly than the Gadarene swine.

Ioris stretched his hand for the letters—his dark cheek grew very white; but the Lady Joan snatched, before he could touch, them.

"Oh, bother! What do you come pulling a long face for, Robert? The letters will keep till to-morrow. Bad news always keeps and never evaporates—worse luck! Of course everything's going wrong, you wouldn't listen to *me* either of you."

And she read the letters disdainfully, tossing a page here and there to Ioris. She was not very anxious herself—the concession had been got ages ago, and had been taken discreetly and advantageously to the English market, where everybody that knows anything takes their golden eggs at all times to be hatched; nothing could undo the fact of the concession, or take away its profits. As for the sheep that were silly as the Gadarene swine, if they liked to run down the slope, let 'em.

That was the Lady Joan's opinion.

The letters were indeed of very ominous import; Mr. Challoner had not exaggerated, he never did exaggerate—he was a very exact man.

All the letters were bad, and could scarcely have been worse; they told of riotous work-people clamouring for wages, of labour at a standstill for want of funds, of ill-conducted tides that sucked under every bit of timber or stone deposited near them, of many millions that had produced nothing except some rotten piles, convenient resting-place for barnacles; and finally, very disagreeable hints that shareholders were dissatisfied and clamoured, and began to talk of a commission of inquiry.

Ioris's changeful face altered from its pallor to an angry and nervous flush.

"But it is abominable!" he said, rising in an indignant surprise and pain. Why should they write in that manner? They can surely know that I have done my best. Is not my own money gone in the sand and the sea with theirs? I do not comprehend. Would they insult me?"

"Nobody talks of insult in business, Io," said the Lady Joan, drily. "In business you pocket your fine feelings. Don't look like that. What does it matter? They are a set of idiots."

"I do not understand," said Ioris, unheeding, crushing in his hand one of the letters he had read. "Can any man give better guarantee of his good faith than to risk all he has? You said it was an enterprise that was good; all these men said it was good. I have done my best; I have imperilled myself; I will pay those labourers that cry for their wages out of my own means single-handed; if I am penniless to-morrow I will pay them all. Yes, to-day. But how is it my fault? Can I govern the waters? Can I say to the sea, Peace? Could I tell that the sands would sink and the storms arise? They have no patience, those people, and no pity."

He was strongly agitated; his face had grown very white again and the nerves of his brow were swollen. He paced up and down the room. He did not understand.

Mr. Challoner leaned back in his chair, and trimmed his nails thoughtfully. He liked being a shepherd, and knew that he would probably have to cease being a shepherd, if those silly flocks screamed so loudly; yet he enjoyed the moment.

He felt more compassionate contempt than ever for Baron Chemnitz, who could think of nothing better than those uncomfortable and discreditable pistol shots in a field in Flanders.

Lady Joan picked up the crumpled letter and smoothed it.

"Don't look so awfully put out, Io," she said, with a rough effort at consolation. "It'll all come right, and don't for Heaven's sake talk of going paying the navvies and shipwrights yourself. You always will come to grief in business, because you always will bring such fine sentiments into it with you. Remember the china pot that would go swimming down stream with the iron pots—that's you to the life——"

"I shall pay them," said Ioris, between his teeth.

In all these bitter and angry letters nothing had stung him so much as the statement that the foreign workmen on the Gulf of Faro were clamouring against the direction for their unpaid wages.

"Oh, Heavens! what a fool you are!" she cried with utter impatience. "You've no more right or need to pay them than the Duke of Oban! Do you think because his name's on the prospectus, he'll go and empty his pockets for all those yelling brutes? The works are at a stand-still for a little time for want of funds; the men must take the rough with the smooth, the fat with the lean; they know that well enough. They can't complain; let 'em look to the contractors who brought 'em over to the work! We're not the contractors."

"I shall pay them," said Ioris. "I shall pay them as long as I can, if I sell Fiordelisa."

"Sell Fiordelisa!"

She sprang erect on to her feet. No tigress bereft of her young ever darted into more vivid fury, more instantaneous ferocity of attack and defence.

"Sell Fiordelisa!" was he mad? was she? was the world in its orbit? were the heavens shining around and above? "Sell Fiordelisa!"

Mr. Challoner, having pared the remaining nail on his little finger with scrupulous attention, lifted his eyes and saw his wife transformed, her eyes blazing, her lips quivering, her head flung back, her voice ringing shrill as a clarion, her breath hissing fierce as a storm wind.

"My love, you forget yourself," said Mr. Challoner, with dignity, draping his toga and adjusting his countenance, though no one was there to behold it. "You forget yourself, Joan. If our friend wish to part with his estate, what is it to us?"

And Mr. Challoner having said this solemnly, only to relieve his conscience, for neither of his companions heard a syllable that he said, picked up the fallen letters, and went to his own small study.

He always withdrew from a scene.

From the study, though afar off, he still heard the echo of his wife's furious voice, as when shut in a mountain cavern you hear the roll of the storm in the valley.

Mr. Challoner lit a comfortable pipe of oriental tobacco, and unfolded his *Pall Mall Gazette*.

"She will end with hysterics," he thought, and looked at his watch. It still wanted three hours of dinner-time. The hysterics would have time to come and pass away before the hour should strike at which they were to go and dine with Lord and Lady Norwich—a fish dinner for Ash Wednesday, at which his wife

would wear a different mask to the wire one of the Corso and the satin one of the Apollo.

Mr. Challoner smoked on serenely.

He felt regret, as he smoked, that Baron Chemnitz, a pillar of the temple of commerce, had not been able to think of anything better than those pistols in the damp Flemish field.

He threw fuel on his stove and slipped his feet in slippers. From the distant apartment there still came dully through the closed doors the furious echo of his wife's outcries. Mr. Challoner felt how thoroughly well Lucretius had understood human nature when he had penned that now hackneyed statement about the placid enjoyment of a tempest when one is safely housed one's self.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A few nights later there was a dinner at the Casa Challoner, to which Etoile had been engaged three weeks before, that she might meet some expected friends of absent Lord Archie's. He had begged them to see her, and had written to his daughter to that effect. They were called Denysons of Kingsclere, people passing but a few days in Rome, learned, agreeable, and high-bred, who loved art and Lord Archie, and from the latter cause visited at the Casa Challoner, and for the former reason laughed very much at its artistic pretensions.

When the evening came, Etoile felt reluctant to go; she got into her dress listlessly and hesitated as to whether she would not send word she was too fatigued and unwell; it would have been partially true; a feverish depression weighed on her, and seemed to undo all the good the calm and mild winter had done her.

"You have been staying out of doors too much at sunset," said her friends; but she felt guilty as they said it; it was not the sunset; it was rather that the trouble of another's life was entering her own, and the agitation and unreality of it were moving her own, which had so long been serenely fixed in the deep tranquillities and truths of art. From the moment that another life has any empire on ours, peace is gone.

Art spreads around us a profound and noble repose, but passion enters it and then art grows restless and troubled as the deep sea at the call of the whirlwind.

"I will not go," she said to herself; she felt to shudder from the touch of the hand which locked the fetters of Ioris on him.

She leaned against the grating of her great casement, watching that sunset which is so oft maligned as the cause of those fevers that men and women's follies, faults, and indiscretions, bring upon themselves. It was burning beyond the dark lines of Monte Mario across the city; she could see the radiance through the bars; the rosy warmth fell across the wide square and made the pavement flush till it looked like porphyry. The piazza was empty, except for a brown-froaked monk and a little child dragging a quantity of arbutue boughs, doomed to the dyers, and cut down ere spring came. She watched the sunset and did not see Ioris passing from the palace until he was beneath the casement; it was not his nearest way home from the Quirinal, but he made it so very often. He uncovered his head and looked up with a smile; the window was not much above him. He had been to see her early that morning.

"Are you dressed already?" he said, in a little alarm. "Am I so late then?"

"My clock was fast; yes, I am dressed, but—if it were not rude, I would so willingly not go. I was thinking of excusing myself even now."

A quick fear leapt into his eyes.

"Oh, do not do that! she would never forgive it."

"Do you think I care either for what she forgives or revenges!"

Etoile spoke with a sudden petulance new to her, leaning against the iron grating of the great embrasure.

"No, no," he murmured, "of course not; but she is a bitter foe, it is not worth while. Come, pray come, for my sake!"

Her eyes softened at the last words.

"It is for that I would stay away," she said, a little impetuously. "I mean—speaking to me as you do of her—it is not possible to feel at ease either with myself or her."

"We must all wear masks in the world," said Ioris, with a little smile and a brilliant joy lighting his uplifted eyes, for her words had said to him more than she thought lay in them.

"I have never worn one," she said, quickly. "Where I could not feel frank friendship, or at least honest indifference, I have never gone; it makes me ashamed, remembering all that you and I have said, to take her hand, to sit at her table. If she knew, what would she say?"

A flush, that was not from the sunset, passed over his face.

"I will never ask you to do it again. But this once pray come—for my sake!"

He raised himself on the stone coping of the wall and passed his hand inside the grating and touched hers.

"I will not go if you do not," he said wilfully. "Promise me."

"This once—no more."

"No more then. Give me a rose to wear in my coat—just one."

She smiled, and broke a half-blown rose off the plants in the *jardinière* and passed it through the bars to him—a creamy tea-scented Niphetos.

He kissed her fingers, and then the rose, uncovered his head once more and went on quickly across the brightness of the square.

She remained motionless, leaning against the casement.

A sense of oppression and of want of frankness and of faith weighed on her. Her creeds were not of the world.

When she passed up the stairs of the Casa Challoner she felt cold, though the night was warm. The Turkish room was full when she entered, but all she saw in the blaze of lights was the face of Ioris; he had a Niphetos rose in his coat.

He came forward, when all others had saluted her, with his grave ceremonious grace of greeting. "*Très-honoré de vous voir, Comtesse. La santé va bien?*"

"How distant he is with her," thought his hostess, with glee. "Marjory must make a mistake. I am sure he never sees her—except here."

The dinner passed off well.

For the first time Etoile saw Lady Joan in her court-mantle of stiff and irreproachable propriety. The Denysens of Kingsclere were not people to be trifled with; and though they had had the bad taste to wish to meet a Parisian artist, and had discomfited her a good deal by bringing that request from her father, still they were persons so irreproachably placed and so highly cultured, that she dared play no antics with them. She had asked some fashionable Russians and some aristocratic Italians to meet them, had a Monsignore, and a very learned German Professor; had put on the Genoa velvet, Irish point, and English propriety, set Ioris far away from herself at table, and discoursed with seriousness, decorousness, and amiability.

Etoile sat near her, and, herself very silent, listened and watched the scene, set and rehearsed for the Denysens of Kingsclere.

Every word seemed to her as if it should bring down some such swift judgment of heaven as smote Ananias and Sapphira's lie. She, who knew the truth, seemed to look down into this woman's soul, and see all its shifts and sophistries, all its nakedness and meanness, until her own heart grew sick. Her own cheeks grew hot with shame, her own eyes grew dark with scorn; she was absent, and scarcely heard what was said to

herself; she was thinking all the while, "Oh, well may the world be sick, since all its food is falsehood!"

And on the other side, far down across the lights and the flowers and the glass, she saw the Niphetos rose in Ioris's breast.

"Your Muse is a very silent one," said Sir Walter Denyson to his hostess, having watched Etoile some time.

"She would talk if *Io* were near her," said Lady Joan, with a short laugh.

"Does she favour your friend then?"

"I believe so, but he's only bored by it at present. Perhaps he will be entangled later on; he is rather weak, you know," said his hostess in a whisper, with another laugh.

Sir Walter, who knew his friend Archie's daughter pretty well, was mystified, and said afterwards to his wife, that he did not fancy Joan cared much about that good-looking Italian, though she did live in his house; she did not seem to think much of him.

The dinner over and the guests gathered once more in the Turkish room, which looked very pretty with flowers in the old blue and white bowls, and coffee served in little jewel-like Persian cups, Lady Joan went to the piano, and her watch-dog came in in time to accompany her. It was not a night for the guitar; the guitar in all its forms, viol, lyre, chitarra, or mandoline, is a melodious and romantic instrument, suggestive of love-trysts and moonlight; the piano is an unpleasant piece of mechanism, invented to spoil the human voice, and domestic and respectable in proportion to its unpleasantness. On propriety nights, Lady Joan always sang to the piano.

Ioris at the moment that his hostess was singing, passed across the chamber to where Etoile was resting on one of the divans.

"What beautiful lace, Madame; point d'Argenton, is it not?" he said, touching the lace of her dress; then added very low—

"How can I thank you for coming! but you seem out of spirits, grave, constrained. What is it?"

"I feel treacherous and untrue!" murmured Etoile wearily, all the scorn and pain she felt glancing for one instant from her eyes to his.

"It is not *you* that are so," he said with a sad tenderness. "But you are quite right. This is no atmosphere for you. I will not ask you to come again——"

"No. I will never come again."

And she kept her word.

"What a charming fan!" said Ioris for the benefit of Sir Walter, who was hovering near, longing to approach her, and

Ioris took the fan and talked of its epoch, Louis Seize, and of fan-painters, and of the *genre rocaille*, on all of which he could speak with judgment, knowledge, and that infinite grace which characterised the least thing that he did or said, and Sir Walter, watching his occasion, joined in the conversation, and found the Muse still silent.

When Etoile left, which was early, Ioris could not take her to her carriage, for the host himself performed that office; but Ioris, giving her back her fan, found means to murmur in her ear—

“I shall go away with the others, the night is over for me; I have my talisman with me—my rose.”

“*Coquin!* you play the police for your wife!” he muttered between his teeth, as standing above in the vestibule he watched the form of Mr. Challoner pass down the staircase; and his heart beat angrily within him under the Niphetos rose.

“Io! come here!” cried the Lady Joan, as he returned to her Turkish room. “Here is Sir Walter raving with jealousy of you; he says Etoile would hardly look at him, she seems so much in love with you.”

“But, indeed, I never——” began Sir Walter, in protest.

“Monsieur, I am not so happy,” said Ioris with his coldest smile and airiest grace. “No Muse will stoop to earth for me, and as for the tender passions—*je suis un homme mort!*”

“You do not look it,” said Sir Walter, with a smile.

Lady Joan frowned heavily.

CHAPTER XXX.

LENT had come, and Lady Joan had her black domino and loup hung up in a closet, and put on the meeting-house clothes very demurely, and devoted herself in this pious and dreary period of social life to those especial patron saints of hers, the "people passing through." The "people passing through" were rather bored in Lent, and were glad to be taken about by her to Mimo's and Trillo's to fill up the dull mornings; and in the evening to dine with her—"just by ourselves, you know—nothing but fish"—or ask her to dinner at their various hotels. In Lent, Lady Joan was always as hard at work as the chiming bells and the swinging censers; it was her harvest-time when she looked forward to gathering in the fruits of all the seeds of good-nature, hospitality, attention, and love of the fine arts, which she had been sowing so broadcast ever since early winter. "The people passing through" were always beginning by that time to think of passing out; and it was not her fault if they did not bear with them, as "homing" birds are said to bear foreign seeds, innumerable praises of the Casa Challoner and also numerous articles out of it.

She had borne with the burden of the Lady Blanks all winter; she had endured like the staunchest of martyrs their pomposity or prolixity, their coldness or their curiosity; she had toiled early and late to smile on them and their heavy connubial moiety—magistrate, member of parliament, or peerage nonentity; their pink, long-limbed, long-lipped daughters; their straw-coloured monosyllabic sons; their general infinite ponderousness, weariness, and pre-eminent respectability. She had borne them all with patience inexhaustible, with fortitude unsurpassable.

It was in Lent that she looked for her rewards; it was in Lent that the Lady Blanks asked her to mornings of classical music and teas for colonial bishops; that the pink-cheeked daughters and the straw-coloured sons rode over and lunched at Fiordelisa; that the connubial moieties became of the sheep that the crook of Mr. Challoner guarded; or, if less obliging than that, at least bought a Parmeggianino or a Tabernacle, a fine bit of buhl, or a nice piece of old Modena tapestry.

Lent was her harvest, when the narcissi and the tulips were all out in the Campagna, and the Northerners began to feel hot and to get in a fright about fever, and the families were pleased to breathe the hill-air of Fiordelisa; and the Lady Blanks would

say, "See you in town this season?—yes?—oh!—yes? Delighted;" and resolved that, after all her civility, they must certainly know her in London.

In Lent the Lady Blanks kept her busy, and Fiordelisa was better seen without its lord, so that in Lent Ioris was freer than at any other season of the year.

In the long, still, sunny mornings, when she was escorting the Lady Blanks to Mimo's and Trillo's, or riding out with the straw-coloured sons to Fiordelisa, he found his way to the flower-filled chamber of Etoile, and passed the hours in that sweet atmosphere of sympathy, that vague ecstatic trouble which fills the daybreak of love with a light that is only the lovelier for its clouds.

He found a repose with her that was even sweeter than passion. He was true with her, and before her; here was her essential charm to him. Whoever has to wear a mask is in a sense ill at ease. In the presence of Etoile he threw his mask away. His real nature—impulsive, generous, erring, repentant, tender, contemptuous, sensitive, ironical, by turns—was laid bare to her. He did not speak all the truth to her, but he spoke nothing that was not the truth.

It was a sort of bond with him to her to feel that he did not deceive her. The perpetual strain of the comedy in which he had always to play his part in the Casa Challoner became wearisome; and as his mistress never suspected that he wore a mask he never dared to unloosen it. With this other woman, who understood him and stripped the velvet off his mask and saw the pasteboard underneath, he could toss it aside without disguise, and laugh at the use of it or sigh at the use of it, whichever his mood might be.

It may be doubted if a man is ever really happy with a woman with whom he cannot be candid. The charm of intimacy lies in perfect ease. To need a lie is to endure a restraint.

When tired and perplexed with the chaos in which his fortunes were whirling, in the darkness of disasters that he scarcely understood and still less knew how to confront, he escaped from them as into paradise to the quiet painted chamber, with the mellow sunlight sleeping on the whiteness of the Lenten lilies.

Now and then he asked himself, "Where am I drifting?" but he waited for no answer, and drifted on with closed eyes.

With his mistress he had never been happy. His heart for a while had been "burned in the poisonous solvent" which tens of thousands take for love, knowing no better or loftier thing all their lives long; but the poison had burned itself away and left as its dregs disquietude and satiety. With Etoile he was happy

as a man can only be when the better nature in him is satisfied and not ashamed.

Yet, partly because it was a natural instinct with him to conceal what most he felt, partly from the same sense that makes a man shy of his religion being touched or his emotions laughed at, chiefly because he was always afraid of the ruthless vengeance of his tyrant on any thought of his that wandered from herself, he began to deny as Hamlet denied, forgetful that such denials fall lightly as rain, but, like a raindrop on the trusty steel, may turn to rust and eat a cruel road.

Marjory Scrope going to and fro to her weary labours of copying the Rospigliosi Aurora for Lord Fingal, saw again once—twice—thrice in one week the tall, slender form of Ioris passing across the Square of the Four Horses, and told herself, with a quickly throbbing heart, that he was only going to the Quirinal, but saw, despite her longing not to see, that he did not bear towards the Quirinal, but towards the old, grey, ancient mansion where Etoile lived amidst her frescoes and her flowers.

Marjory, toiling across the last stones of the square in the blast of the stormy Lenten wind, grew sick and pale, grew faint with fear; and as she sat at her work saw the faces of Aurora and the Hours through a mist, and sketched the horses of the chariot out of drawing.

As much as her work would let her have liberty to do—for Lord Fingal was in haste for his copy, and she in haste to see the cheque for it—she kept a spy's watch upon the old palace by the Colonna gardens: she talked with its porter, she went past it in daybreak and dusk; she longed to find something, she hardly knew what, something, anything, against the woman that dwelt there. It was so bitterly hard to her: she had to copy all day and get a pittance at the end of her labours; or if she got more, knew that more was only given out of charity and sympathy, because she was a marquis's grand-daughter and thought praiseworthy so to work for her living. And Etoile—half an hour's rough sketch in charcoal from the hand of Etoile would fetch two hundred guineas in any city of Europe!

As she went to and fro across the square, in sunlight or showers, the horses of Etoile would bespatter her with dust or with mud, or she fancied they did, if they passed by twenty yards off. Watching the door, she would see Ioris pass through with the easy and accustomed air of one who goes where he is expected and is certain of his reception. Sometimes as she went home, with her portfolio under her arm, as evening fell she would see Etoile come out to go to some dinner at Princess Vera's, or some informal "at home" at the Palazzo Farnese. She watched and watched, and hated and hated.

She was a prudent creature under all her bitterness; other-

wise she could have torn her copy of the *Aurora* into shreds with hatred of herself for having to sit copying there whilst this woman, who could make her hundreds in an hour, sat doing nothing amidst her palms and hyacinths and smiling in the face of Ioris!

"I see you often in the Montevallo, Io," she was imprudent enough to say once, biting her lip, and relying on their long intimacy.

Ioris looked surprised and unconscious.

"But certainly—I go often to the Quirinal."

"It is not the Quirinal that I meant," she said sharply. "You go to Etoile."

Ioris, who was smoking, looked at his cigarette and shrugged his shoulders.

"But seldom. One cannot always refuse; she does me the honour to ask me things about Rome—she is composing a Roman picture. She has been spoilt by her world—she is used to rule, and is easily put out."

He said it very tranquilly: it was his impulse always to slip on his velvet mask before interrogation.

Marjory Scrope looked at him sharply. He only partially deceived her.

"What does it matter to you whether she is put out or not, since you dislike her?"

Ioris shrugged his shoulders once more.

"*Mah!* she is a woman; one cannot be rude. You know I never say no. Do not you and Joanna always reproach me with my weakness?"

Marjory laughed uneasily.

"I suppose she is going to paint *you* in the Roman picture and make you celebrated for ever?"

"*Trop d'honneur!*" said Ioris, with a careless smile. "No, it is purely archæological details that I give her. You know I like to trace the old ways under the new. I am of a little use to her—not much."

"And what is this—archæological—picture?"

"The chariot of Tullia," said Ioris, with ready invention. He knew the invention was safe: his questioner would not dare to question the great artist as to her future works.

Marjory looked at him, and still was but half-deceived.

"I do not believe the least in this archæology. I believe you are in love with her!" she said, with a nervous and anxious laugh.

"I have never even liked her," said Ioris, with an admirable *nonchalance*.

"Nor have I," he thought to himself, "because I have always loved her."

Why would they question him? They deserved to get a lie for their pains. And indeed people who ask a man about a woman do merit this punishment.

"What's all this about an archæological picture, Io?" said the Lady Joan fiercely a day later. "Marjory says you are helping Etoile about a new painting. Is it true? Because, if it's true, I won't have it. She'll be putting your portrait in it—I know she will. What do you mean by going there? And I thought she did not paint at all; that the doctors had forbidden her. What lies she tells!"

"Calm yourself, *ma chère*," said Ioris, with a tranquillising gesture. "There is no falsehood at all. She is thinking out a great picture; studying details for it, that is all. Where is the harm?"

"Oh, I suppose she wants to paint something because she makes all her money by painting," said the Lady Joan, with unutterable scorn: she herself sold what other people painted, which is a much loftier occupation. "But what do *you* want to have anything to do with it for?" she continued, still fiercely. "It's ridiculous going there, wasting your time with her. She's horribly rude to *me*—refused my last two invitations, and scarcely took the trouble to make even an excuse. I wanted her to meet Victor Louche. I believe she's afraid of all he knows about her."

Ioris, in an imprudent moment, laughed contemptuously, and Lady Joan, infuriated, continued:

"I won't have you go! If she can't paint her pictures alone, let 'em go unpainted. She never did paint 'em alone; I always told you so. She always got men to help her—always. She's laying a trap—I can see that. She never comes near me now; scarcely calls. After all that I've done for her! I can see through her drift well enough. Does she dare talk of me to you?"

"*Mais, ma chère!*—as if I should allow any one to profane your name to me!"

"Profane fiddlesticks!" cried Lady Joan, in a fury. "I'm certain she knows; I'm certain she guesses."

Ioris was silent. It was a delicate subject.

"You wouldn't go near her if you respected me," said Lady Joan, more and more in a fury. "I knew what she thought that first day up at Piordelisa. I could see it in her eyes. I dare say she's gone and written to my father. It is disgraceful. You have no decency, Io, and no sense, to go and see that woman, and sit with her and talk over *me*. Oh, it is no use your saying anything. Archæology! Rubbish! Whenever did you care about archæology? You care about a new face, a trick of manner, a way of looking, as if the earth and everybody on it

were dust and dirt and muck and mire! That's new, and takes your fancy, and you forget all my sacrifices, all I have endured, all I have risked, all I have——"

Hysterics choked her.

Ioris rose and paced the chamber.

"This is absurd, intolerable!" he muttered, half-aloud. He was tempted to fling off his mask and throw it at her feet for good and aye.

"Is it absurd that you think an adventuress an angel?" she screamed, with a shrill hiss.

"I think no woman an angel—who can who has had the happiness to live with you?" he interrupted her, with a chill laugh that barbed the dubious compliment and sent it home through the triple mantle of her vanity.

"Oh, no, I never claim to be one," she said bitterly; "I leave such pretensions for those who have more wit to paint their wings than I have; for those who fool you with childlike eyes and the seriousness of a would-be Muse, and some paltry talk of the Greek gods and heroes. When it is for her you neglect me—forget me—insult me——"

"Who has insulted you? When do you ever let yourself be forgotten? What is the use of my coming to you? You only receive me with reproach and reprimand," said Ioris, taking refuge in answering anger, and letting escape him a touch of all the sombre irritation of which his soul was full. "What do you require that I do not give up? Is there any moment of my time my own? You even claim to know my thoughts better than I know them. Do I ever rebel? Do I take my freedom, as other men would? *Ma chère*, be reasonable. You treat me like a spaniel: you chain me and you cuff me. Cannot you be content? I am your dog, if it be not an affront to any dog to say so."

He spoke with the bitter though subdued detestation of himself, and of his bondage, that day by day was growing sterner and stronger in him; and the mere glimpse of any such passion in him filled her with terror.

If he had only read her aright, he might with ease have been her master.

This was not the first of such scenes that the last few weeks had witnessed; not the first muttering of that storm of revolt which some day or another she felt would burst above her head and wrench from her not only himself but—Fiordelisa. She grew terrified; her breath failed her before the vision that for a moment flashed before her eyes. Had she wrung the galled withers once too often? Had she strained a strand too far the ever-yielding rope?

She fell at his feet in a tempest of emotion, rage, fear,

suspicion, apprehension, all seething in her, as angry seas seethe under the lightning and the hurricane of a storm.

Vast is the power of turbulence; it will conquer when all that is holy, that is tender, that is long-suffering, that is noble, shrink away unheard and disregarded.

Ioris might have ruled her had he read her aright; but alas! he missed the occasion to seize the mastery. He let her rave on, and drooped his head to the storm.

When she was somewhat calmer he kissed her hands.

"*Carissima mia*, you excite yourself needlessly," he said, and bent his knee beside her. "If it be as you fancy—if any one divine your amiable goodness to me—the more need is it to lull such suspicions by not displaying any jealousy of me: you must see that, do you not? Be tranquil."

"You will never go to her, then—never?" muttered his tyrant, clenching her hands on his wrist.

"Never; or at the utmost merely as much as courtesy and caution require," said Ioris. "Pray be tranquil, *mia cara*! These scenes distress me unspeakably. There is no kind of ground for them."

She grew calmer and was convinced. Ioris as he knelt there felt none of the composure that he affected so admirably. His temples ached with the scream of her voice, his pulses thrilled with apprehension and anger, his heart beat with a stifled shame and a stifled rage. He was tempted by a great longing to fling off the mask and tell the truth and bid her do her worst.

But he hesitated; the old habit of subserviency to her was on him heavy and paralysing. He believed also that he was vitally necessary to her, the very breath of her life; he was reluctant to strike her so dread a blow; he was afraid to rise and say to his tyrant, "I will be free!"

"Another time," he said to himself: another time he would confess to her that his allegiance was a lifeless thing of habit and of duty. Another time he would say to her, "Love is not in our command, and mine is dead."

"Another time."

And he murmured words that were false, and spent caresses that were joyless and faithless, and knew that he was false to his fairest faith, yet had not strength to unclasp the hands that held him and put back the mouth that wooed him, and say the simple truth: "Our love is dead!"

He left the house ill at ease and ashamed, conscious that he had been disloyal to all the best emotions of his nature; feeling as though he had for ever lost the right to look into the clear, proud eyes of Etoile.

Yet he fancied he would have done more wrong had he risen

up boldly and told the truth to his mistress, and broken from the unholy bonds that held him.

The curious honour of his world and of his sex was about him like the fetters of an encircling serpent about the living flesh, paralysing action and numbing and deadening life. The woman that was worthless in his sight was sacred. The woman that was sacred in his sight was sacrificed.

He fancied this was honour : and if the men of his generation could have been put to the vote they would have declared it honour too.

For men of the world have set up an idol called honour which is a false idol, very foolish, very clumsy, very cruel, yet to which they immolate themselves with a sincerity and a stupidity that are touching, and immolate oftentimes those dear to them.

According to this idol the fiat goes forth that a man may blamelessly desert an innocent woman, but not a guilty one ; he may break the heart of the bruised lily, and no harm done ; but he must bide the brunt with perjured Guinevere, or be man-sworn. It is curious reasoning and illogical, and the results brutal and often tragical ; but men in adhering to it are quite honest.

It is this honesty which women sharp of sight and keen of execution turn with ruthless skill to their own purposes.

Men are never as clever as they think themselves, and are generally much better than other people suppose them.

"Ioris is in love with Etoile!" said his mistress, showing her white teeth in a harsh laugh, but airing her indifference as she rang the changes on the same subject a little later the very next day, when, as it chanced, Etoile was carelessly named in her presence by Douglas Græme after luncheon.

"What folly!" said Ioris, angrily ; and his heart beat thickly, for he felt once again a coward and untrue.

"I believe you are!" she cried, glad to say so, since her cousin, Douglas Græme, was by to hear, "I do believe you are! Well, if it be so, *gare à vous!* I should not wish to see any friend of mine in her toils."

Douglas Græme opened his blue eyes wide.

"You mean the great painter that I have seen at your house? Oh, she is as cold as ice; every one knows that; she is quite indifferent to men. If Ioris——"

"Has touched her, he has a marvellous conquest, I suppose you mean?" said the Lady Joan with impatience. "How can you believe such trash? Innocent! So is a flower-pot innocent; but when the crickets and mice tumble into it, where it's set to trap them covered over with moss, I don't fancy they think so, do they? Do you believe she made all the money she spends by her pictures? Good heavens, Douglas, where have you lived? Are you in short frocks still?"

"I do not understand," began her cousin, who looked bewildered.

Ioris grew a shade paler.

"It would, at least, be well to respect your father's friend and your own guest," he said in a low tone; but there were a sternness and a menace in his voice which were new from his lips and strange to her ear.

"A woman my father's seen once or twice in a few studios!" she said, with boundless scorn. "How can you call her his friend?"

"Because she is so."

"She is nothing of the kind! She is the daughter of that old beast, Voightel, and my father is a fool about anything that Voightel——"

"You said the other day she was found in the streets."

"So she was. Voightel never noticed her till she grew famous—if you call it famous—thanks to David Istrion in his dotage."

"Is all the world in its dotage, then, also?"

"Very likely it is. What are her pictures after all? Nothing but would-be *Gérômes*; rank imitations of all his bestialities. Tom Tonans says so. They wouldn't *hang* them even in England."

"It is a pity—for England."

Ioris rose as he said so and lighted a cigar.

Lady Joan burst into a boisterous laugh.

"You see he's in love, don't you, Douglas?"

"He has been so a long time, my cousin; we all are," said Douglas Græme gallantly, being desirous of preventing a scene.

"Stuff!" said his cousin, too violently irritated in her own soul to be pacified with any such mere compliment. "He is in love with Etoile; you see he is in love with Etoile. He frowns if one says a syllable, and can't talk of her without turning pale or red. Poor Io! Can't you find anybody better to erect into an angel than a Paris Sappho that has knocked about Bohemian ateliers all her days, and gets herself up in intellect and innocence to please you, as she drapes her lay figure in calico and calls it *Pudicitia*? Do be more sensible, pray. Take some Vittoria Colonna of your own nationality: you can know all about *her*."

Ioris shrugged his shoulders and turned his back.

"Your interest in me is most benevolent," he said, for the benefit of Douglas Græme. "But I am not in the peril you imagine, *foi d'honneur*. And, if you will allow me to correct you—Sappho did not paint."

Ioris went away angered deeply and a little ashamed of himself.

He felt as the faithless follower felt when the cock crew; as all feel who let a treachery pass by unpunished and condoned by

a cowardly silence. He felt disloyal with a twofold disloyalty. As for the slander, it was the mere venomous breath of a jealous woman; so he said to himself. He could have laughed aloud at it, it seemed so ludicrous to him, so clumsy, so poor. Yet it clung about him like a noxious vapour that hangs in the air.

You cannot strike the vapour, nor seize it, nor see it; yet it is there, spoiling all sweet genial weather and flower-scented breezes, and making the glad day sickly.

The lie seemed to buzz about him like a mosquito stinging in the sunshine.

Lady Joan, left alone, sat lost in thought. On calm reflection she was convinced that her friend Marjory's apprehensions resulted only from the fogs and fancies of her friend Marjory's brain, whose weakness of hopeless jealousy she knew.

"Of course he cares for nobody but me," she thought. She filled the universe to herself; she was convinced that she filled it equally to him. She was easily lulled, easily blinded, because her immeasurable vanity was for ever between her and any truth.

She was envious of Etoile, she distrusted the influence of Etoile, and she hated her for her glance, for her words, for her modes of life, for her scarcely veiled contempt—for anything and everything—as only one woman can hate another.

But Lady Joan, though Cleopatra in her idle hours, was not a Cleopatra to whom Mark Antony was all. She was a Cleopatra to whom her ships, her freights, her slaves, her allies, and her merchandise in general were always more than her hero; and at this moment she was a Cleopatra overburdened with many prosaic anxieties.

She had caught fire as easily as tow held to a match to the incendiary whispers of her friend, and had flamed fiercely as petroleum; but the flame had soon died down, and only burned dully among the embers of sullen fears. Ioris gone, and Douglas Græme also, she grew a prey to more solid and more terrestrial anxieties than those of passion. Her bureau was inundated with papers and her head was filled with plans; acres of arithmetic spread out before her eyes, and reams of correspondence, with telegrams in cypher, aroused and tore her from the pre-occupation of amorous doubts.

Beyond everything she was a woman of business.

She went across to her husband's little sanctum and opened the door.

"Robert, come out and talk over my idea."

Mr. Challoner, who was busy writing, took his eyeglasses off his nose and emerged from his den.

"It is of little use to talk," he said, 'gloomily; "it is time to act."

"Of course it is. That's just what I want to see you about. One ought to go there directly."

"One ought," said Mr. Challoner, still deep in gloom. "Besides, you must not give any more dinners; really the cost——"

"I'm sure we've everything from Fiordelisa, except the fish," said his wife, "and the foreign wines and the sweatmeats. And I shall go on giving dinners till I go—if I do go. People are nasty the moment you don't stop their mouths with a dinner. What do you think, by the way, Marjory told me this morning about Etoile?—that Io's in love with her! Did you ever know such an idiotic absurdity?"

Mr. Challoner was too wrapped in gloom to smile, though the ghost of what might in happier circumstances have been a smile came upon his face.

"I saw it coming on long ago; indeed, the very night she came here," he replied tranquilly; and he did, even in his gloom, rather enjoy saying that.

His wife's eyes flashed fire.

"Oh, did you?" she said, roughly. "You're always very clever in seeing through a millstone, and never see an inch before your own nose. Io's just told me he can't endure her."

"It does not interest me either way," said Mr. Challoner, drearily. "Did you call me to tell me that?"

"Of course not," said Lady Joan, searching amongst her cypher telegrams and her acres of arithmetic.

"I want you to read all these, and decide whether you think we can do it."

Mr. Challoner grumbled, fixed his glasses, and busied himself in her papers.

She was as great as that Emperor of Byzantium who ruled the East and the West, yet busied himself selling his hen's eggs and bought diamonds with the proceeds.

Were it a question of five francs for a coffee-cup or five millions for a concession, she was equal to either fortune. Nobody could say that she despised trifles. She might be marking out a royal subsidy in her meditations, but if anybody came in that wanted a length of lace she devoted herself to the lace. She really ought to have been a greater woman than she was; but then, alas! her vanity obscured her vision: it was a *myopia* which impeded her way to entire success.

Mr. Challoner knew this very well, and on occasions even said it—flatly. Then they had a battle-royal. But they did not have a battle now, as he gave all his mind to her telegrams and arithmetic.

She was at this time almost too much overwhelmed with business, dearly as she loved it. She was sending Titian's "Choice of Paris" off to the most puissant Imperial Government of

Pickelhaube, for which an Inspector of Fine Arts, more enlightened than the Russians are, had just purchased it. She felt that she would miss the eight-feet high nudities behind her dinner-table sadly, but she obeyed beyond anything the injunction, "Put money i' thy purse, put money i' thy purse." She was also shipping off several Old Masters to a loan collection in Edinburgh. Her name looked well in the catalogues, and the loan meant generally an eventual sale to some wealthy body or another visiting the collection. Again, and first and foremost, she had a great transaction in meditation.

Lady Joan loved transactions; she always found them lucrative. "Keep on turning money: some will always stick to your fingers," said a capitalist once; and she thought the same.

The present transaction was no less a one than the meditated transfer of the *Società Italiana Inglese del Ponte Calabrese-Siciliano* from one body of shepherds to another.

The Duke of Oban had withdrawn from the presidency, in disgust and with strong language, expressed in rough Doric; the sheep that were as silly as swine were rushing down their slope with such headlong haste and uproar that all the world could hear them, and Mr. Challoner with his crook could do nothing to stop them. The workmen down on the coast, by the sunken piles and the devouring sea, had been paid for some weeks at the cost of Ioris; she began to foresee that if things went on at this rate Fiordelisa would be imperilled, let her shriek as she would.

Lying awake at nights between her evening's cotillions and her morning's *bric-à-brac*, she had turned it over and over all carnival in her busy brain, and now that with Lent things were really at a climax and could not well be worse anyhow, her busy brain had cleverly hit on a transfer.

If a transfer could only be accomplished everything would be saved (except the sheep that were as silly as swine), and everything would be changed (except Mr. Challoner's crook). Now, in the whole length and breadth of the financial world, as on the turf, there is nothing so difficult as to "raise a dead 'un in the betting;" nothing so arduous as to float once more into the ambient air a bubble that has already collapsed and burst.

It is quite easy to inflate a new commercial balloon; nothing casier. A door-plate, a good name or two, and plenty of advertisements; these are all that are necessary. There need be nothing behind the door-plate, nobody behind the names; the advertisements will do all that is enough, if only the thing be new; quite new. Now, the Messina bridge was not new; it was an exploded rocket, a pulled cracker, a melted sorbet, an umbrella turned inside out; anything, indeed, that is limp, collapsed, exhausted, and done for; but the energy of the Lady Joan was not to be

daunted by these facts. Indeed, she cared very little for facts at any time.

Facts were for the odious people that carried dates at their fingers' ends and a list of pottery marks in their pockets, who went to museums to verify their history, and to their bankers to know the wisdom of any enterprise: she was above such little trivialities of common sense as facts.

So she resolved to set afloat on the markets of the world a transfer.

"But, *mia carissima*," objected Mimo Burletta, in a simile born of his trade, "the poor pot is dropped, broken, all to pieces, you cannot make it whole again! You cannot."

"Stuff!" said the Lady Joan. "Don't you join 'em with white-of-egg, and paint 'em all over when *your* pots break? So shall I."

Mimo was silent; he was aware of the excellence of the process. Occasionally, horrid people called connoisseurs would scrape with a penknife, and discover the white-of-egg, and the paint that was over the glaze, instead of under it. But then connoisseurs are few. He smiled at them when he met them as the Romans at death, but he never offered to sell them anything. Were there financial connoisseurs on the Exchanges? Mimo did not know. He felt muddled, and did not venture on any more remonstrance.

"She is a great creature," he thought to himself; there were always the pigs to show that, the lovely pink pigs slowly maturing to succulent bacon, in the patent English galvanized iron pigsties out at Fiordelisa.

And she prepared to join her broken pot and paint it.

She projected a transfer, *i.e.*, the same plant, the same projects, the same society, but a new purchase by new purchasers, an issue of new shares, and an entirely new prospectus.

Modern enterprises mainly consist of a prospectus, as a tadpole of its head.

She also intended to have a new name. She meant to call her piles in the sand, etc., "The Mediterranean Company for the Facilitation of Communication in the South."

This was beautifully vague, and would also allow for the driving in of other piles into many other places on the sea shores of Europe and Africa.

Lady Joan had not lived in Damascus without learning a good deal about speculation. In Asia and Africa speculators of all kinds are as many as the mosquitoes. In the wasted garden of the world English bankers, French financiers, Greek and Italian and German *agents d'affaires*, Jews of all sorts and sizes, fatten there as fatten the locusts, and like the locusts devour everything ere harvest be due. The dream-cities of the "Arabian Nights"

are the stews in which the children of Israel gorge, and the splendid and lovely lands that were once the envy of Alexander, and the amaze of Herodotus, are now in their misery delivered over to the oppression and the extortion of tyrants, far viler than Pharaoh or Mithridates, Tamerlane or Aurungzebe, tyrants whose sceptre is a pen, whose throne is a greasy office stool, and whose symbol is a pair of shears.

Far and wide, from the Fellah of Egypt to the Arab of Lebanon, from the Negro that slaves in Soudan to the Buddhist that toils among the canebrakes on Irrawaddy, one and all bend their backs to the rod of the European adventurer, one and all are stript and cheated, and plundered and sacrificed, to put money in the purses of contractor and commission agent; one and all pay by the sweat of their brow and the famine of their bodies for the curse of civilization that falls across them, devastating as drought, blighting as the close clouds of locusts when the sun grows dark with them.

Prostrate the East lies, to be strangled and sheared by the West.

How dare it complain? The adventurers bring it in return a steam-engine and a religion.

Lady Joan had not so long watched this shearing process without learning more or less how to do it, and getting a pair of scissors if not a pair of shears.

Indeed, so thoroughly congenial was the East to her by reason of the perpetual clipping which is possible there, that it was a very great pity she ever had left it. Italy, since it has enjoyed freedom, has felt the shears a good deal, but it is never so possible to wield them incessantly in the temperate zone. People talk, and things get into the papers in Europe; in Asia you are beyond all that.

At this juncture Lady Joan sighed for Asia: *on revient toujours à ses premiers amours*. In Asia the workmen never would have dared to squeal for wages; there would have been the *koubash* on their backs, and spirited pashas to appeal to, who would have known better than to give a hearing to a lot of diggers of the sand.

She sighed for Asia, but she had no necromancer's wand to transport Messina beyond the Dardanelles; so she turned her thoughts, *faute de mieux*, to London.

Only to carry out her intentions it was absolutely necessary that she should go to London, and this at once, if her scheme were to have any chance of prosperity.

There is no place like London for finding the white-of-egg that will adhere, and the paint that will stick on the glaze, of financial pots that are broken.

Above all, beyond all, and most odious of all, Ioris must know

nothing of it till the mended pot was successfully painted and sold. Ioris, on occasion, had odd, quixotic caprices. Ioris would almost certainly be for leaving the shreds of the pot untouched, whilst, as best he could, he would essay to save the sheep that were silly as the Gadarene swine. Ioris, if he knew her scheme, would inevitably, in one of his idiotic impulses, spoil all.

This was what she had resolved as she had lain awake after her carnival balls—restless, angry, and disturbed.

She knew how to paint the pot, being conversant with all the ins and outs and technicalities of business, and having a passion for speculation, which was the one kindred sentiment that linked her and Mr. Challoner together in the one isolated harmony of their lives.

She knew, or thought she knew, the kind of people to float it; she knew, or thought she knew, the puppets needful to replace the Duke of Oban and the rest of the indispensable marionnettes. She took her husband into her confidence, and he, otherwise willing that Ioris should be ruined, was very unwilling to cease to be a shepherd himself, and very cordially approved of all her intentions.

"Do you think we can do it?" she said this morning, as her "idea" ploughed a slow way through the heavy earth of Mr. Challoner's more stolid intelligence, backed with letters from trusty correspondents in various commercial dens and rows of figures drilled like Prussian regiments.

Mr. Challoner gazed drearily and solemnly into vacancy, and laid the mass of papers on his knee that related to the mending of the broken pot.

"Yes, I think you can," he said with the cautious utterance of a man who never committed himself. "Ye—es, I think you can—it promises; but I suppose you see very well that it will necessitate your going to London."

Across his wife's face fell a gloom deep as that of a moonless night.

"Of course I know I must," she said sullenly, and with a staunch and heroic firmness.

The obligation to go away lay on her soul like lead. It harassed her night and day. It haunted her like a bad dream, but she was resolved to brave everything, and go. Mended and painted the pot must be, and nobody could do it but herself.

When inclination and interest pulled different ways, she was far too heroic a woman not to make inclination walk the plank and disappear. The Venusberg was all very well, but Capel Court and Cannon Street were better. Besides, her Venusberg was safe enough; she would put a padlock on it, and leave her watch-dog on guard.

She was quite of Lady Cardiff's opinion, that Love was the

bonbons and olives of the banquet of life. Money was the soup and fish and the *rôti*. Still, the necessity to go away harassed her soul as the steam-plough harrows the wild Highland waste.

It was absolutely necessary to go to London, and go to London without him. She passed feverish days and sleepless nights, torn between desire and dread: desire to go and make her projects realities, dread to leave him behind her near the woman she hated.

If she did not go, she saw that Fiordelisa might be swamped with the piles in the sands by the sea, and Ioris without Fiordelisa would not have been half Ioris, nay, no Ioris at all, as he stood in her measure. Being forced to lose either Ioris or Fiordelisa, she would unhesitatingly have let Ioris go. Passion was strong with her, but never so strong as self-interest. The Dame du Comptoir outbalanced the Cleopatra.

Nevertheless, the conflict of the two was tough and bitter, and rent her sorely as they wrestled. She began to grow worn, hectic, and haggard; in these days of indecision she became nervous, restless, sullen, hysterical, by turns. Ioris was touched with remorse at what he thought was a carking anxiety for his welfare; and Mr. Challoner, who for once was honoured with being in her secret, thought it advisable to make a few visits all by himself in society with a sombre air, like a newly-made widower's, and hint that decline had always been terribly fatal to her family; his wife would over-exert herself; alas! yes, she would; her energy was so great, and her physical strength not proportionate to it.

"A most devoted husband," said Society, and thought he expressed himself very nicely.

"An excellent person; most attached couple," said General Desart, standing on the club steps, whilst Mrs. Desart was at home having her eyebrows painted on her lovely brow by the Duke of Buouretiro.

CHAPTER XXXI.

LENT passed and the weather grew warm; in after years when they looked back to the Lenten time it was beautiful and embalmed, as with the scent of buried blossoms, and the sounds of music for ever stilled, in the hearts of both Ioris and Etoile.

It was the true and perfect springtide of the year, when Love walks amongst the flowers, and comes a step nearer what it seeks with every dawn.

Without Love, spring is of all seasons cruel; more cruel than all frost and frown of winter.

As this springtide grew, and with it grew the warmth, and the mountain sides changed to a dewy greenness, and the plains were all a sea of grasses and of flowers, she moved from her old palace to a villa as old outside the gates, set in a grand old garden, and, with the reedy Anio running by its walls. Ioris found the place for her, persuaded her to rent it, charged himself with facilitating the transport there of her bronzes, tapestries, and canvases, and was glad that the copyist of the Aurora would no longer be able to spy upon him when he should pass up on to these old grey terraces.

His mistress heard of this change with anger; it bewildered and annoyed her; go away herself she fancied that she must; she would fain have had the woman in whom she was vaguely conscious of a rival, away also.

"Is it true that she has taken Rocaldi?" she said sharply to Ioris.

Ioris looked up: "Who has taken Rocaldi?"

"What affectation, as if you didn't know! They say *you* took it for her——"

"Pardon me, I forgot; yes, I believe she has taken it; but it is no doing of mine; indeed, I told her it was not thought very healthy."

He looked so indifferent, and spoke so tranquilly, that his listener ás usual was deceived.

"Marjory was mistaken and so was I; he does not care," she thought to herself; aloud she said with a laugh:—"It is on the road to Fiordelisa. I suppose that counterbalances its unhealthiness; she is certainly bent on your subjugation, Io!"

"*Ma chère!* What folly!"

He had passed all that morning in the old neglected gardens of Rocaldi with Etoile, and in the stately melancholy rooms,

arranging her pictures, planning changes for her, directing workmen, listening to the birds that filled the ilex thickets, and flew about the palms.

But he was not afraid; Etoile and she seldom met, and he had no longer to fear intimacy between them; moreover, he knew that Etoile never spoke of him: it would not be like her nature or her ways.

"*Vous l'avez voulu!*" he thought to himself as he saw how completely his mistress was blinded; she had brought it on her own head; she had kept him in a subserviency, and demanded from him a surrender of his time, and of his thoughts, which no man will give without being driven into the self-compensation of concealment. Time and thought, like all his other possessions, were signed and sealed away into her hands, but it was only human nature that he should rebel, and take his own out of both time and thought unknown to her. His life had been pervaded by her like a room by the smell of camphor wood. Open the window, bring in flowers, burn pastilles, throw rosewater about, do what you will, there is the smell of the camphor wood still. To escape it you must go out to the fresh air. He had done so.

The fault was hers.

She had made passion into a police sergeant, and put love under lock and key. Passion betrayed and Love escaped her: it was only in the laws of human nature.

But she did not know it.

To Ioris, as to every Italian, mystery and silence were the very essence of Love's life; to steal away when the lark sings, is the joy of every lover since the days of Romeo. His mistress, who had called to all the crowing cocks at dawn to see him on her balcony, had thrown aside the sweetest spell of power.

The lover in him was once more awake, and he deceived his gaoler as the lover ever does.

Meanwhile Etoile remained unconscious of the labyrinth she entered, conscious only of the fatal paradiso of an artist's dreams.

Etoile thought very little about the world at any time, and much of its evil was written in a dead tongue to her.

Of course nobody would have believed that. Nevertheless so it was.

A woman whose chief companionship has been that of wise men, will keep an absolute honesty of mind, because she will have been in contact with honest minds that would not contaminate her own. Women are the chief corrupters of women. Men, unless they are very bad, and there are not many that are so, in their intercourse with a woman whom they find without guile, will, when they speak of evil, bid her know it as the base nettle, which has no power to sting the bold and innocent hand

that grasps to cast it forth. Women will smile and say the nettle is difficult to pluck—oh, yes, no doubt—but then there is a flower inside it—only touch and see.

Passions and sins had been revealed to her. She had seen the human pulses all laid bare by the anatomists of three thousand years of human culture. She had heard the thinker muse aloud, the cynic sneer, the poet sigh, over the conflict of the beast and of the god which, in its various shapes, is yet the same in all the human histories, be they under the law of Nim, or Vishnu, or Aphrodite, or Christ.

She was not ignorant of evil, but innocent of it.

As women of religion, with the red cross on their breasts, bend over the wide war-wounds of naked men, so she beheld corruption, yet remained aloof from it; knew it and yet knew it not; beheld and heard of it, yet was unsullied by it as a child may walk clean through a lazaretto.

The world hardly understands this difference.

It cannot comprehend that the awakening of the intelligence and the sleep of the senses can long be co-existent.

Shakespeare knew this truth. Goethe did not. Gretchen has no middle way betwixt a stupid ignorance and an absolute surrender. But Imogen knows well the perils of her path, but with clear eyes and with firm feet goes onward. The women of Shakespeare are all innocent, with the noblest, fairest, truest faith and form of innocence, but they are not ignorant of evil. Of all the poets' women they are the most perfect. But they know the woe of the world that is around them, and, when the hour comes, the passion.

But if a living woman comes, who has, like Imogen, her drawn sword yet her child's heart, the world will never believe in her.

She will shake the rock of its disbelief as vainly as Desdemona shook Othello's. Faithful to one alone as Desdemona she may be, but like Desdemona she must die, deemed to her latest breath a wanton. And when she lies dead they will say so still. For the world, not having Othello's love, has not his penitence.

"Aren't you going away at all, then?" said the Lady Joan sharply of Etoile, meeting her one day by chance in the Borghese woods during Holy Week.

"I think not," she murmured coldly. "I have taken an old villa outside the gates; I go to remain there in a few days."

"So Io told me; Rocaldi isn't it? I am sure I am most charmed," said Lady Joan, remembering herself. "You must come to see us very often at Fiordelisa. We all go up to Fiordelisa in a week or so for the summer. Rocaldi lies on the way to Fiordelisa; I think Io said so."

Then coldly they bade each other good-day.

"Isn't it indecent the way she lives?" said the Lady Joan fiercely, as she passed onward.

"I don't see any indecency," said Mr. Challoner, looking about him as if it were a thing to be detected in the air.

"You never see an inch before your face," said his wife. "Of course I'll never let her into Fiordelisa, if she stay here a hundred years, rude, insolent, ungrateful, abominable creature that she is!"

"What has she done, except fascinate Ioris?" said Mr. Challoner, with a face of gloom, but an inward complacency.

"Fascinate a fiddlestick!" said his wife, with consummate scorn. "As if I cared whatever fool he may make of himself!—besides I know he can't bear her; she disgusts him; he has said so fifty times; he hates notorious women."

"You cannot properly call her notorious," said Mr. Challoner, who loved nothing better than to pick at straws with his wife, "the word notorious means——"

"I don't want to be taught out of a dictionary by you," said the Lady Joan. "It's enough for me that she refuses my invitations, and never even calls on me, except by leaving a card; when you think all we did for her, all our kindness, all our hospitality—a woman that really it is horrible to think has ever crossed our threshold, when one knows what she is——"

"It is inconsistent to be annoyed with her for crossing it no more, then," said Mr. Challoner, who was in a contradictory and boorish humour, having come from a melancholy perusal of the reports of the Società Italiana-Inglese.

"Oh, you and I think her right, of course. You'd both see me insulted and trampled on, and never get out of your chairs! You're just like my father——"

"H-us-sh!" said Mr. Challoner, who thought a scene would be inconvenient in the well-filled Borghese woods with the scarlet royal liveries passing. "H-us-sh! What does it matter, one way or the other? Nothing easier than to say we made a mistake in receiving her. My love, here is Lady Norwich. Dear Lady Norwich——"

That night Etoile went to a reception at the Palazzo Farnese, which was one of the many eminent houses that did not open its doors to the Lady Joan. The reception was given for the Emperor and Empress of Amazonia, high and Catholic sovereigns, in their travels. It was now Easter, and Rome had still a fashionable foreign crowd at its command, though the crowd were on the eve of dispersion to northern lands, to the glories of Marlborough House and the Orleans Club, to the grand stand of Chantilly and the pavilion of Trouville.

Pasqua, though shorn of its pontifical splendours, still is Pasqua in Rome; and the fashionable crowd was waiting for its final functions, and enjoying a few last farewell-fêtes meanwhile.

Ioris came late, very late; he had escaped from the Casa Challoner by the plea of a Prince's command, which existed only in his imagination, and had left the Lady Joan sitting, sullen and worried, over cypher telegrams and arithmetic, smoking strong Turkish and drinking black coffee.

He came into the beautiful gallery that has no rival in the world; himself looking in unison with the place, pale, graceful, pensive, proud, giving a low bow here, a charming greeting there, grand seigneur in every gesture, as all his forefathers had been before him.

He made his slow, courteous way through the august crowd, where nearly every one was an acquaintance, and by degrees, without apparent desire or design, approached a woman in a cream-hued dress, made like the gowns of the Marie de Medicis portraits, with pale yellow roses and japonica, and diamonds at her bosom and about her throat; it was Etoile, talking with two foreign ministers.

He saw her glance wander towards him, her colour change, her breath come quicker; though he could not hear her words he felt sure that they lost their lucidity and eloquence, and grew absent and ill connected. He smiled and murmured to himself once more—

“Je vois bien que tu m'aimes;
Tu rougis quand je te regarde.”

Then he joined her, and spoke with her and Princess Vera on the topic of the hour.

As his eyes dwelt caressingly on the long, straight folds of the creamy dress and its old filmy laces, he thought with a shudder of the strong hand that had just grasped his in the Casa Challoner, and the stern lips gripping their cigarette.

After a while, without observation, he drew her away alone; he was a master in the little arts of society; and the Palazzo Farnese is so vast that five hundred people in its mighty chambers look no more than a handful of leaves on a lake.

“I want to ask you something, if you will not be too harsh to me,” he murmured, his eyes resting tenderly on the yellow roses that moved with her breath.

“Am I likely to be harsh? Ask.”

“You never go to *her* now,” he said in a low tone.

“No. You know very well why——”

He hesitated, then said, with that sort of timidity which in him was a caressing and supplicating gracefulness:

“Perhaps if you would go, now and then, it might be better.”

“Why?”

“Alas! you know her temper, her vehemence, her fancies; if she think herself slighted she may take some vengeance——”

"On you!" said Etoile, with a glance of vague alarm.

"Ah, no! On you——!"

"On me!" she echoed, with an inflection of absolute indifference and scorn. "What can any woman do to me, or man either? What idle fears! Are you not ashamed to give them any shape in words?"

"Alas!" said Ioris with a sigh and paused; he thought of the base calumnies that his mistress sent forth as serpents dart their tongues, but he shrank from speaking of them. "I understand that intimacy between you is impossible," he murmured; "but the mere empty courtesies of society, the mere forms of friendship, might be more wisely kept up; if you would dine there again, call oftener——"

"I will not."

Etoile turned suddenly, and her eyes burned for a moment into his with an anger that filled him with admiration, because it was so righteous and so frank.

"When I came to her I did not know what she was. Now I know. I have become your friend; more than your friend; I have your confidence. Perhaps you are wrong to give it; perhaps I am wrong to receive it; perhaps—but so it is. We cannot unsay all that we have said. If she come to me I will receive her, through respect to her father, receive her with all courtesy, but I will not go into her house again—never, never! I will not affect to her to hold her in esteem while in my heart I hold her infamous—I will not! My friendship has never been the empty falsehood of Society; it has never been the secret sneer of conventionality covered with a conventional caress; it shall not be so to her. Could I palm off the lie on her, I should merit any lie that she might tell of me!"

She spoke with force and with emotion; her own inmost sense of her antagonism to this woman made her strive the more to be loyal to her, made her cling the closer to sincerity in her dealings with her.

"You are superb, but you are not of this world," he said, and kissed her hands with tender wondering eyes.

"I try to be just," said Etoile wearily, a sense of constraint and concealment began to weigh upon her.

Ioris sighed.

This truthfulness was beautiful to him, because it was so strange, so utterly unlike all that he had ever known in the women who had influenced his life, but it embarrassed him. He felt—and hated himself for so feeling—that women were easier to deal with who had those instincts of intrigue, those proficiencies in deception, which he had been wont to think inborn in all womanhood.

"Justice is very difficult and very rare," he said, with hesitation.

"Yes, more difficult, more rare than mercy. But one must be just, even to an enemy, or be base."

She paused abruptly and coloured, remembering all that it implied to acknowledge his mistress as her foe.

He smiled, well pleased, though troubled.

"You are half a warrior, half a child, and all a Muse," he said tenderly. "But you are not made for our base and banal world."

"You have women enough around you that are. Go to them. Will you not?"

She smiled a little as she spoke.

"No."

"Then do not complain of me."

"Do I complain?"

Their voices were very low, there was no one near them; the great room was full of the scent of roses; above-head were the gorgeous yet tender hues of frescoes.

Her eyes fell beneath his.

"Why will you talk to me of her?" she said irrelevantly, with pain and with impatience in her voice. "It is to be false to both her and me. You must know that."

"I could never be false to *you*," he murmured, and, as they stood together, stooped till his breath was on her brow and his cheek touched hers.

She grew very pale; he watched the quick, high beating of her heart.

"You are not free to speak so."

"I will be free!"

They were both silent; beyond the doors there were some movement and subdued murmur of voices. They were no longer alone with the roses; the world, that is the enemy of passion, was about them.

The great empress for whom this Pasqua fête was given, and who was an amiable old lady in a knitted shawl, and her husband who was driving the host almost to madness by requiring the date and history of every morsel of sculpture and of fresco on the walls and ceilings, were both approaching, with a polite little throng of decorated personages about them.

They wished to see Etoile. She went to be presented to them.

"Dreadful bore!" murmured Lady Cardiff to her as she went. "However, my dear, you are strong in dates and documents, so perhaps it will not plague you so much as it does his poor Excellency yonder. They should not educate Royalties and Imperialities; they are very much nicer when they can only say How-do."

Ioris seeing Lady Cardiff's eyes on him, bent down with

ardent devotion to a beautiful countrywoman of his own, the Duchess of Ara Cœli.

"I wonder if he is entangling Etoile or disentangling himself," thought Lady Cardiff, following him with her glance. "There will be a very great difference. Whichever way he begins, he will end. I wish I knew him well enough to talk to him, not that one ever does any good in these things—they always have their course like comets, and no one can change it by screaming. But I am afraid—yes I am afraid. He will not be bully enough to get rid of that bully of his. It is an odd thing that men are always over-brutal or over-gentle. I wish Lady Joan had caught a Sir John Brute. Ioris has not enough of the brute. As for *her*, if she do care for him, he ought to be Petrarch and Mirabeau blended. *Our* sort of love will never do for her. Our love is like the moccoletti, the fun consists in setting fire to as many tapers and blowing out as many as ever we can. The passions of the world are only tapers, dipped in petroleum sometimes indeed, but never either the sun or the stars that she dreams of:—don't you think so, Ioris?" she asked suddenly aloud.

"*Plût-il?*" said Ioris, leaving his duchess.

Lady Cardiff looked at him through her eyeglass.

"I was thinking aloud; a bad habit; I was thinking, not one man in a million can love a woman like Mirabeau; and not one in ten millions like Petrarch. Now, women like our feminine Raffaele yonder, want Mirabeaus and Petrarchs, who are not to be found. Failing the suns and the stars, do you think such a woman should be satisfied with the light of a taper?"

He looked annoyed.

"I presume she would be the best judge of the light that would content her!" he said coldly; "but I should imagine, madame, that she was quite above the need of any light except her own."

Lady Cardiff smiled.

"I am very glad to hear you say so; you see a good deal of her, I believe—and can tell one. Of course, genius is like the nautilus, all sufficient for itself in its pretty shell, quite at home in the big ocean, with no fear from any storm. But if a wanton stone from a boat passing by breaks the shell, where is the nautilus then? Drowned; just like any common creature! Oh dear, no! I was not thinking of anything in especial. Do tell me who that new woman is in the black and red, with the huge pearls; never saw her before;—a Roumanian princess? Ah! they are all princesses in Roumania."

Then Lady Cardiff released him; but he did not return to the duchess.

"Drowned—just like any common creature!"

The words rang in his ears and haunted him. He knew the

truth that their figure conveyed. The nautilus shell had ridden on the sea of the world safe and buoyant through the winds of fame and the storm of envy. Was his the hand that should cast the stone from the passing boat, and make that fairy voyage end in wreck and in disaster? Forbid it, Heaven!

He was a man thoughtful by nature, though by deliberate choice he often would not think. To the dangers of the course he was pursuing he was wilfully blind, because he did not choose to pause and look close into its peril; but these words shook him to a fuller, franker sense of the thing that he was doing. He was not Petrarch, he was not Mirabeau; but he was the man she loved, and so the maker of her fate; the light that would shed eternal summer about her, or the stone that would sink her in the storm.

He went slowly through the brilliant things with the Carraccio and the Raphael frescoes above his head, and the courteous smile and empty phrase of society upon his lips; but he saw very little of what was around him; he saw only the creamy hues of a far-off dress, the shining of some diamonds amongst yellow flowers; a wistful glance now and then from eyes that, unconscious of what they did, followed and sought him.

"Drowned—just like any common creature!"

Yes! if he chose.

His pulse beat high, his cheek grew warm; he was victorious, yet uneasy in his victory.

People began to go away; the imperial guests had gone, and others were free to go.

He went out and waited on the great stairs until the time that he saw her pass by; an old man, a minister, was conducting her to her carriage.

Ioris drew back with a deep bow, and let her pass on down into the halls below and the gardens that were illumined to the edge of the Tiber. The great courts of Farnese were full of flickering torches, trampling horses, gilded lackeys, the lamps of many colours twinkled under the sombre arcades. Such scenes are commonplace elsewhere, and pall by repetition, but in Rome they are always majestic because the past is always in them: through these gardens Borgia has passed, through these arcades Raffaele has roamed.

Ioris threw his furs about him, and went down into the torch glare and the press of men and horses. Above the garden the moon was hanging; music came from the open casements on the air.

A carriage was passing slowly outward into the Campo dei Fiori.

At a sign from him his own followed it.

When she descended at her door, he was there in the clear moonlight.

"Did you think I could bear not to say good night?" he murmured, and he wrapped her cashmeres closer round her very gently, and led her up the darkened staircase under the pallid sad frescoes of Overbeck.

In the great rooms the lamps were burning, the fire was low on the hearth, the flowers were spreading their sweetness on vacancy.

He took the cashmeres from about her, and his arms enclosed her instead.

"You love me, I love you," he said softly. "Make me what you think me; what you wish me—I am yours!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

SOME persons passing at that moment down the stairs and corridors of the Farnese were saying to each other, "What absurdity to suppose that there was anything between Ioris and Etoile! Did you not see him? how coldly he bowed. He seems hardly to know anything of her. Why will people talk nonsense? Besides, you know very well he is entirely *accaparé* by that Englishwoman; oh, yes."

Lady Cardiff, as she overheard the remark as she also passed down the staircase, smiled to herself. It was the sort of thing that interested her—to watch the drama passing on the stage, and hear the comments of the audience on it at the same time.

"What a *fine mouche* he is!" she thought. "Well, I will keep their secret, though they don't choose to trust me with it. But a day's secrecy here will be an error with his bully—he should be fierce, firm, and frank—but he won't be, not he; I wish he were Petrarch or Mirabeau. My poor nautilus—how long will he leave you serene in your shell, and how much will he understand the harm he does when he breaks it?"

And she went home, and for once had no pleasure in reading her *Figaro* in bed.

"That's what comes of being interested in a creature that feels things; it is catching, like diphtheria," she thought angrily to herself as she read a column of *Villemessant* twice over without earing about it; and decided to take a little chloral.

"He won't even know how soon the shell will break; that will be the worst of it," she thought, as she poured out the drops. "He has lived so long with a woman as hard as a cocoa-nut."

The woman who was hard as a cocoa-nut was at that hour, as the carriages sped through the moonlit midnight from the courts of Farnese—rolling through Rome with a dull thunder that reached her ear and made her angry, because to Farnese she went not herself—sitting alone before her writing table, smoking, sorting her papers and telegrams, and issuing commands to her sleepy, worn-out waiting-woman.

“Have you everything packed for Fiordelisa?” she was saying in conclusion. “The oxen will be in here early for the boxes; mind that you are ready, that is all; and tell the cook to go up there by sunrise, as soon as he’s been to market, because I shall have some people up to luncheon, and he must have a good many things cold and savoury; see you tell him; and let those letters be posted, and give me my bath by eight o’clock, and send somebody round early to the Prince Ioris to tell him to be here by ten, not a second later, and that’s all, I think. I’ll wear my linsey-woolsey gown to-morrow, and I come back to go to the opera, you know, at night, and you will get out my amber dress and the emeralds for that.”

And she went to her couch and slept in peace though the carriages were still rolling by from Farnese.

In the morning her messenger brought her a pencilled note back; Ioris regretted—apologised—but he was in his room, and could not rise; he had one of his bad headaches. He would endeavour to join her later.

On any other day she would have darted down to his house and made his head ache ten times more severely with her fuss and her remedies and her noise, but that day she was busy, she could only send Mr. Challoner; against Mr. Challoner, Ioris kept his chamber door barred, and sent out word that he was really unwell. She heard, hesitated: should she go herself?—then reflected that he so often had headaches, especially now, and she was overwhelmed with business, and she had promised to drive out Douglas Græme, and Guido Serravalle, and a Lady Blank was to go up and lunch at Fiordelisa of whom there were great hopes in regard to the purchase of a huge oaken altar screen, discovered by Mimo.

She was sorry that he had his headache, because in her rough way she cared for him, but perhaps it was not altogether unfortunate; the Lady Blank who was to buy the altar screen was a person of prudish and peculiar notions, and there was coming up with her an English Consul, who was a family man, and would bring his young daughters to play lawn-tennis—a bore certainly, but useful when any Lady Blanks were there. Lady Joan regarded the Consul with boundless contempt, as the very poorest, limpest threadpaper of a man, but the threadpaper was noted for strong domestic principles and sentiments, and as he

played lawn-tennis with his little girls on the grass of Fiordelisa, was a useful pawn on her social chess-board. "Dear Mr. Dunallan takes his children there, and he never would, you know, if——" said the small gentilities of whom he was chief, whenever the small gentilities had qualms.

When the ponies came to the door and the oxen came to bear these household gods of the Casa Challoner, which it was then wont to carry with them, like the ancient Latins she made up her mind and took her departure for Fiordelisa.

She was in love with Ioris, but the apple of her eye, the jewel of her treasures, the idol of her heart was Fiordelisa.

Besides she could not lose the chance of selling the altar screen.

So she slashed the ponies and started off, Douglas Græme beside her, her guitar and her gun at her feet, the oxen labouring far behind under the weight of the household gods.

To move something looked respectable, and like ownership of the old grey castle on the hill. Besides some of the household gods were always for sale; a use to which the ancient Latins did not put them.

"Is she gone, Gianino?" asked Ioris of his servant, who had been sent for to be useful for the packing of the gods. "Yes, Excellence," said the man, and added under his breath, "the saints be praised!"

"You may open the blinds," said Ioris, who was lying on the outside of his bed, and he rose at once.

There was a knot of yellow roses and jessamine in a glass by his bed; they were crushed and faded flowers, but he put them to his lips, and the sweetness of the most triumphant hour of his life seemed in them.

He was very happy, yet he knew himself in great peril.

The one consciousness heightened the other.

He passed the morning at Rocaldi with Etoile.

She was not yet living there, but often passed the days in the lonely, balmy garden.

The terraces were moss-grown now, the statues mutilated and fallen, the ivy and pimpernel ran in their innocent riot over the unweeded walks, but it was beautiful; walls of thick ilex darkness enclosed it, and here and there tall palms soared up from a wilderness of roses. The cool and lovely summer that comes with April was like a caress upon the land; under all the fresh foliage birds sang, and above head was a cloudless sky.

"Ah, how I wonder that I could ever live without——"

Etoile sighed amidst it all as only the happy sigh, and left the phrase unended.

Ioris, sitting at her feet on the marble steps of the terrace, smiled, and kissed the hands he held.

"The nautilus sails no more by itself," he thought, and aloud he said, "You were but a Muse before; now you are a woman. I have called you down to earth."

"Is it earth?" she said dreamily. Hardly——"

To her it seemed something diviner far.

But with him love was of earth, and did not lift its wings.

"Had he seen her first

She might have made this and that other world another world

For the sick man, but now

The shackles of an old love straitened him;"

and the baneful influence of long years of bondage was like a sickness in him, body and soul. He was passionately proud of the new power he had gained, of the new bonds that he in turn had woven, of the strength he had found to usurp dominion over a mind by others untameable and beyond human reach.

But triumph and passion are far off the love of which Etoile dreamed. These subtle fires, such as now enclosed her in their warmth and devouring speed, are fires that burn up the soul and then die down.

But of this she was ignorant; she only knew that all existence was transfigured for her, that her past seemed pale and poor as a starved flower on a barren moor; and only now—now, when his hands touched her and his eyes gazed at her, did she awake and live.

"It is terrible," she said, and grew pale, and was afraid of these new toys that seemed like gods to rule and to destroy.

He only smiled with victorious consciousness. "Your dreams were the enemies of men. I have made them my prisoners. They will never wander from me now."

"It is that which is terrible," she said under her breath, with a vague and sudden sense of that irremediable loss which Love calls gain.

Some dread, like Merlin's dread, passed over her like a chill wind.

"If I fear

Giving you power upon me thro' the charm

That you might play me falsely, having power.

However well you think you love me now

(As sons of kings, loving in pupilage,

Have turned to tyrants when they came to power),

I rather dread the loss of use than fame."

But to him this dread, in her, was sweetest flattery, supreme attestation of his empire, that made him glad with a boy's gladness, proud with a despot's pride. Ioris only smiled and kissed her closed eyelids with his silent lips.

And once more she was blind—and happy.

The lovely day burned itself out in fire, colour like the flush of the rose-laurel flowers spreading itself over the western heavens.

They had been happy.

By common tacit consent they had never spoken of the one who was now the enemy of both.

She loomed in the darkness of their future like a tempest cloud that darkens the fair sky with menace, sure to be fulfilled; but neither remembered her, or if her memory passed over them, would dwell on it. To the woman it seemed so easy for him to close the doors of the grave on the old ashes of a dead shame, and come forth from it into the bright air of untainted joys, that she thought it outrage to him to speak of such a thing as duty; to the man the effort seemed so difficult, that he would not face its obligation till the sheer hour of need should strike.

To her he had said, "I will be free." She would have thought it insult to doubt his word or urge on its fulfilment. To him, its fulfilment looked so hard and hazardous that he drove it from his memory until such time as he should be forced to rise and grapple with the spectre.

To her, it seemed simple as the growth of a field lily, that he should rise from unworthiness and be free; to him it seemed perilous as seizure of an asp, to divorce himself from the snake-like folds of a guilty tie.

So the hours passed, and one name was unspoken between them.

To her it seemed shameful,—to him it seemed loathsome—to utter it.

At sunset he took his leave of her. She did not ask him whither he went.

They loved each other; that seemed to Etoile to shut out forever from them the baseness of suspicion, the unworthiness of doubt.

But at the last moment, when his cheek was against her in his farewell, she murmured to him—

"You will tell her the truth—now?"

"Yes."

He murmured back the word on her lips.

He went; and left her to the dreams that henceforth were his captives, her hands lightly clasped behind her head, her eyes closed, her lips parted in a soft slight smile: nothing any more, but only the woman that he loved, the woman that loved him; and gladder, prouder to be that, than of all fame, or use, or praise, or place on earth.

He went, and his reluctant steps and his hesitating will bore him to what all the manhood in him rebelled against and swore; bore him to the lamplight, the laughter, the smoke, and the quarrels of the Turkish chamber.

He felt a coward and untrue, but habit is stronger than conscience; he said to himself, "To-morrow, not to-night."

He recoiled from seizing the asp and flinging it from him, yet he submitted under the sense of its tightening folds.

"You do not look ill now," said his tyrant sharply, standing under the light in yellow shining raiment, with glittering eyes, fierce and curious, and menacing. "You do not look ill now. What has kept you away? You are coming to the opera?"

"I am not well; but I will come."

He grew very pale; he seemed to suffer. She bent her jealous eyes on him.

"Are you ill? I believe there is nothing the matter with you, except indolence. We had a splendid day. I have sold the screen; everything is gone up; we can go to stay to-morrow. You do look pale; take some wine; no? Poor Io! You are feverish."

She brushed the hair off his forehead and leant her hand on it: he shuddered under the touch.

"There is your husband," he muttered impatiently, and moved away; she stared at him; she thought he must be feverish indeed to be afraid of her lord's presence.

Other men entered to accompany her to the opera.

It was a great night by royal command. The house was brilliant; the soldier-king sat with his hands resting on the hilt of his sword; the opera was "Comte Ory;" never did Ioris hear the graceful melodies of it ever again without a shudder of hateful recollection.

His mistress looked well; her amber skirts swept his feet, thick gold chains were twisted around her shapely head: she had a great fan of ostrich feathers; she laughed and was gay; he sat in the chair behind her and seldom spoke.

Turning her head to him, she thought that it was true he was not well, he had fever; his face was so flushed, and his eyes had so strange a look.

"May I leave you?" he asked her early in the hateful night. "May I leave you? You have others with you, and indeed I am ill, at least too ill to bear this music and this glare."

She pitied him for once; believed; and let him go.

He returned to Etoile, to the cool shadowy flower-filled chamber on the Montecavallo, with its windows open to the Rospigliosi gardens, to the song of the nightingales, and the shine of the stars.

"Have you told her?" she asked him.

"I could not to-night," he answered. "She is gone to the opera. Do not let us talk of her. I want peace. I have been without it so long. Give it me!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

ON the morrow Ioris said to himself, "I must tell her now." And his courage quailed even as quailed Launcelot's before the Queen, knowing that "at a wink the false love leaps to hate."

And he was not armed even as Launcelot was, with a crown diamond, to pave the way to freedom.

He knew his tyrant well enough to know that liberty she would have sold—at a high price—but he had not such purchase money. All his riches, such as they were, were whirling already in the maelstrom of her speculations or sunk in the sands by the Syrens' sea.

He awoke with a heavy heart, even though his pulse beat high with fresh and unworn joys. There was a conflict to go through that he dreaded; it had been easier to stand stript to his shirt, with the bare sword in his hand, in the dawn that saw a duel in his student days. Moreover, he scarcely wished to unveil this sweet secrecy, this love unguessed of the world, and carry it out into the broad day that had no shadows. He was so weary of publicity, of bondage, of thralldom, that all the world could laugh at as street crowds can jeer a galley-slave working with his gang on public roads; it was delightful to him once more to know a passion that was shut in between his own heart and one other's, like a culled flower between the closed pages of a poem.

When the public voice proclaims it, love has lost half its mystic charm. Never to the lover is the hour of love so fair as when it is stole from the rest of the covetous day, and the gentle theft is hidden from the world. Troubled and feverish he was; but it is this trouble and this fever that are youth.

For a few days he was ill enough to make it natural that he should let the transit to Fiordelisa be made without him; ill enough to withdraw himself with the petulance of indisposition from his mistress's presence; well enough to rise as the cool twilight came, and take his way to the quiet chambers of Etoile. Once or twice he was compelled to go to Fiordelisa. He felt a traitor and false: not to the woman who reigned at Fiordelisa but to Etoile, to whom he did not confess that he went thither to Etoile, to whom he said, "She is in the country: do not let us speak of her."

The position was full of peril, but it was a peril that was sweet; as sweet as it was to Romeo to gaze up into the moonlit

balcony, knowing that naked swords might be unsheathed, and waiting for him amongst the white garden lilies.

Etoile did not dream of any peril.

He loved her: it seemed to her as natural as for the day to dawn that he should put from about him the foul bonds of an unlovely and loveless tyranny. The days went by, to her beautiful as a child's fancy of the Hesperides. She never questioned him. She never doubted him. Since he loved her, it seemed to her that all the threads of those coarse and roughly woven meshes, twisted round his life, must fall asunder and drop away at a touch like the frail gross things they were. To doubt his power to put them from about him now, would have seemed to her like doubting his honour itself; like doubting the very manhood in him. She asked him nothing because she feared nothing. He was the maker and master of both their fates. "Since he loves me"—she would think with a smile; and think that all was said, and made sure, in that.

It was one of those errors, simple, yet sublime, which cost far more than many a crime.

Once she said to him with a thrill of pain and of aversion—

"Must she be there in your house all the summer?" And he answered her—

"What matter, love, since I am not there?"

He had come from Fiordelisa that day and had promised to return there; but he meant honestly to go thither no more after that one evening. He said to himself every day, "To-morrow I will tell the truth," and every day faded and died with the truth untold. Had Etoile been more mistrustful of him, it might have been better for him: it would have been less easy to deceive her, less temptation to continue in the perilous path of secrecy. As it was, he closed her eyes and kissed their shut lids, and knew well that they would not open unless he bade them. She lived in her dreams; and her dreams as he had said were his captives.

One day she awoke from her dreams for a moment, and looked at him with eyes whose tenderness seemed to him to hold all heaven in their gaze, and said to him in a low tone, "Let her stay in the house if you must—your dead mother's house!—but tell her of this, tell her all the truth at once. It is but just to her."

"I will." He kissed her as he promised.

She shivered a little as with a sudden chill. "Tell her, so that I may never see her again near you: it would hurt me; I feel as if it would kill me now."

Ioris promised her once again, and meant what he vowed. "They will meet in the world; they will be friends a few years hence," he thought; "or at least any other women would but these."

His heart misgave him ; his task was harder than he strove to think it. He was used to the banal and brief passions of society ; the ties so close one hour, so loose the next ; the prudent shallow hatreds that kissed and jested, the fleet emotions that seethed like boiling froth, and evaporated in mere vapour ; the poor base trumpety evanescent thing that women of the world call love. These were what he had seen, and what he had known, but a chill passed over him as he felt that it was not with such as those that he had now to deal ; that on one side of him was a passion cruel as death, and on the other side a love high as the angels : that of the women who claimed his life now, one was too fierce, the other too frank, for either ever to drift away into the indifference, that is the world's form of forgiveness, ever to look into the other's face and smile because Society was watching.

He left her and drove across the plain in the radiant afternoon colours, warm on the clusters of cistus, and the plains of grass ; the April light was lovely about his path, and in the thickets by the ruins and the tombs the thrushes and finches were singing, and the white butterflies were afloat like leaves of white roses scattered on the wind.

He drove slowly though all the loveliness and lustre of the fast-declining day ; he dreaded the place whither he went, the voice that would there smite on his ear. He was happy with a sweet sense of youth, of triumph, of sympathy, of hope, that had long been a stranger to his breast ; but he was ill at ease, and his pulse beat with a dull apprehension.

This woman to whom he was faithless, was not a woman to forgive.

The sun had set when he reached Fiordelisa, but day still lingered golden, yet shadowy. With a strange sense of loathing he threw the reins to his servant, and approached the house by a side path that led by an old arched door into the cortile.

He heard the tinkle of cups, the uproar of laughter, the sounds of the mandoline, and his mistress's voice singing one of the popular songs :—

“ Ad ogni fenestra vo' tendere un lacio
 A tradimento per tradir la luna,
 A tradimento per tradir le stelle,
 A tradimento per tradir il sole,
 Perche restai tradito dall' Amore ! ”

Tradito.—his blood ran cold, as if a dagger touched him. What would her vengeance be when she knew herself betrayed, befooled, forsaken ? He had felt a bare blade in a duel, and faced a rain of bullets in a battle with as much calmness as other men ; he had carried the dead, and watched by the sick, in the great

cholera of Rome with tranquil and dauntless devotion ; but the bravest man on earth will quail before a woman that he fears.

Ioris as he stood a moment by the old grey door, before unlatching it, felt a sickly sense at once of fear, and of loathing, as the fierce imperious singing thrilled through his nerves. When he should tell her that she must arise and depart, and let another reign there, how would it be ?

Through a grating in the door he saw the court ; the tea-table, the lounging chairs, the rugs and skins, the hanging creepers ; he saw Mr. Challoner dozing, the child playing with a coloured balloon, the servants moving with a tray, Burletta and Serravalle smoking, Douglas Græme making tea, and on a couch that was covered with a tiger skin, the Lady Joan singing her song of treason, and striking the chords of her mandoline.

With a horrible blankness and suddenness, the full realisation fell on him of how utterly she believed herself to be mistress there until the grave should take her !

With a shock he himself realised how bitter as death, and inexorable as hatred, are those unholy unions which are a blasphemy of marriage and a parody of love, yet are passed off on a world that is willing to be duped,—as friendship.

He opened the door with the reckless gesture of a man who goes straight on a drawn sword : he was sick of his bonds, indifferent to his danger, braced to the conflict, ready for the worst,—the hour of fate and of freedom had struck.

Lady Joan, as the door unclosed, stopped in her song, and loosened her hold of her mandoline. "Io! How late you are! I have some sad news for you, come here!"

He went reluctant; he stood by her with a look on his face new there ; she was not alone, he could say nothing. The hour had passed : his courage had sunk.

"Grandmother is very ill," said the Lady Joan. "I have got to go to England. How you look——!"

"It is sudden," said Ioris, and his voice shook a little ; his heart leapt with a great relief and a great joy ; she thought the emotion was sorrow and despair.

"Awfully sudden," she said, as her hand closed on his, which was cold and unresponsive. "I had the telegram this afternoon. They fear she cannot live."

It was true : she had had the telegram, and it had arrived opportunely to give her a reason for that journey which was so inevitable and imperative in the pursuit of her idea.

Burletta, who knew that the real cause of the journey was that the poor pot was going to be mended and painted, sat and smoked with the obese gravity of a fat pasha. "What a great creature she is!" he thought, "always a good little lie ready, smooth as an egg, round as an apple."

He did not himself believe any more in the telegram than he had done in the Parmeggianino, but there he wronged her. She had really had it, favoured by fortune, as fortune always favours the bold.

"Such a sad thing," said Douglas Græme over the teapot. "Such a bore, too, just as we were all so tremendously jolly up here. Poor old Lady Archiestoune! Why couldn't she go off before? She must be really quite antediluvian!"

Mr. Challoner, waking from his slumbers, shook his head.

"Ninety years of a most admirable life now going to its long rest!" he said, with a tinge of poetry in his feelings and his tone. "The train leaves at 7.45, I think. Joan, always impetuous, wished to start to-night, but it is impossible to pack."

Ioris all the while stood silent.

Lady Joan got out of her tiger-skin couch, and gave her little girl a box on the ear.

"You heartless little thing! How dare you play with that bladder, when poor old great grannie is dying, and you will never be able to see her any more?"

"You were singing, mamma," murmured the child. "You were singing. I did not know——"

"Come here, my darling; never mind mamma," said Mr. Challoner, from his rocking-chair.

Lady Joan, with a glance and a gesture that Ioris knew and was in the habit of obeying, flung herself out of the iron gate which led to the old grassy pleasaunce beyond the court, where the peacocks were strutting under the boughs.

"How odd you look, Io!" she muttered, as he followed her. "What is the matter with you?"

The truth sprang to his lips.

Had it been spoken, all his future would have been freed, and have risen to a brighter and a purer light, as the loosed lark rises to the sun. But the cruel mischances that mock men were at work in that rosy evening air.

As he hesitated, and kept silence, Douglas Græme came through the open gate after them, throwing cake to the peacocks.

"What will all your beasts and your birds do without you, Joan?" he said, in the easy familiarity of their cousinship, seventy-seven times removed.

"Io will be here to take care of them," said the Lady Joan, tartly, annoyed to be followed when she wished to be alone.

"Do you mean you are going without Io?" cried Douglas Græme, saucily. "I should have as soon dreamt of your going without—your husband!"

"Don't be impertinent," said his cousin, more tartly still.

Ioris stood pale and silent under the boughs, and turned and went back to the house.

"You are breaking his heart, you cruel woman!" said Douglas Græme, with a merry laugh.

She smiled, and bade him hold his tongue. She liked to be thought cruel,—and invulnerable.

Dinner was soon after served as the moon rose, and Ioris was not again alone with her. He was excited, and talked and laughed with more animation than was his wont; his eyes occasionally had a brilliant flash of light in them, that Mr. Challoner, who was an observant man, alone saw.

"He is glad we are going," thought Mr. Challoner, and pitied the man who knew his wife so little as to imagine she would not come back. Mr. Challoner himself intended to come back: he liked the place; he liked the shooting; he liked the model pig-styes; he liked, above all, leaving his wife there, whilst he himself went to the baths.

"Not come back? *pas si bête!*" mused Mr. Challoner, as he ate his olives slowly, and sipped his old lacryma with relish. Memories of some of Ioris's careless signatures floated before his mental vision. There was no knowing; things might be managed. Mortgages are elastic things, but they are given to sudden collapse like other elastic articles. The place would be a nice dower for his own little daughter, and he fancied there was a title that went with the land. So Mr. Challoner dreamed over Ioris's olives and Ioris's lacryma-christi. Mr. Challoner was a poor man indeed, but he was a practical man. Ioris was not practical.

The moon shone through the grated casements in on the old dining-hall, on to the dinner-table with its flowers, sweetmeats, and fruits, and flashed on the silver dagger that was run through the Lady Joan's braided hair.

Ioris's feverish vivacity had changed into an absorbed silence. He was thinking of another woman whom the moonbeams might soon find there.

Outside the nightingales were singing.

Lady Joan looked at his averted face.

"Poor fellow," she thought, "how unhappy he is!"

There is always something pathetic about a person who is utterly and entirely deceived. In her absolute self-deception even Lady Joan became pathetic.

The dinner was long. Mr. Challoner and Burletta both liked their dinners. When at last it was over, Lady Joan caught up her guitar, threw its riband over her shoulders, and sauntered out into the cortile, and thence into the garden once more.

"Come with me, Io!" she called to him.

He hesitated; then obeyed with laggard step.

Douglas Græme this time was too discreet to follow them. He stayed in the court with Mr. Challoner, and smoked.

It was nine o'clock; the grass was dewy beneath their feet; the crescent moon was sinking. As Ioris joined her outside the gate in the fragrant darkness, she stretched out her hand, and curled her arm about his, and leaned towards him.

She took his stillness and his irresponsiveness for grief and for anger.

"Don't mind it so much," she said, tenderly. "I shall come back as soon as ever I can, and I will write every day, and you might meet me in Paris, as you have done before. Io! how pale you are!"

"It is a shock to me to lose you so suddenly," he muttered, and he wound his arm about her as she leaned against his shoulder.

"I cannot tell her now," he thought. "It will be easier to write it, and it will hurt her less."

So the lie passed, that for evermore he was never to undo and unwind from about his life.

As he stooped his head where they stood together in the twilight garden ways, and kissed her, he felt disloyal and unfaithful; but it was not the disloyalty to her that smote him—not the unfaithfulness to her that stung him with its sense of shame.

He felt disloyal to the other lips that he had touched that day; he felt unfaithful to the fairer faith that had come to him with the April blossoms like a gift of God.

"*Amor mio!*" murmured his mistress, flinging her arms about his throat in that fierce tenderness with which in her strange way she loved him.

The nightingales were singing in the leaves. He could have strangled them for that jarring tumult of song.

Ioris shuddered under the embrace; but he submitted to it.

"I cannot tell her the truth to-night," he thought.

Alas for him! the day was never to dawn that should hear him tell it her.

The lovely deep azure of the sky was above them, with here and there the clusters of the stars; the air was full of the fresh fragrance of the spring; near them were the glossy dark leaves of an orange tree and the curling tendrils of a purple clematis that covered the old grey wall of the cortile. He never again saw this garden path of his old home, by evening time, in starlight, without a sickly passion of regret.

If he had but put her arms from about his throat, and told her the truth then!

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE summer night waned and passed, and the sunrise came, and a day of hurry, turmoil, nuisance, noise, bustle, business followed it, and with the fall of evening she went from Fiordelisa; and he let her go, still with the truth untold.

"It will be easier written," he said to himself, with the procrastinating habit of a hesitating and indolent temperament, and stood in the glare and dust and uproar of the railway terminus, seeing the train for the north steam slowly out into the golden haze, past the old broken temples and the ruined aqueducts.

She had gone, believing a falsehood; she had gone, believing him broken-hearted; she had gone, saying to him, "I shall be back by harvest," and thinking to herself, "How he will miss me! What will he do?"

And he let her go wrapped in the happy lie that her own vanity made her accept with so simple a credulity, like the merest peasant maiden that ever lent an ear to the whispers of her own amorous vanity.

He let her go, self-deluded.

As the steam drifted over the distant Campagna and the train vanished in the yellow mists of the hot evening, he drew a deep breath, like a man who casts from his shoulders a burden borne too long.

Then he went to the woman he loved.

The sunset splendours of the falling night were streaming through the glow of roses on the terrace as with glad and impetuous eagerness he entered her presence, and threw himself at her feet.

"Rejoice with me!" he cried, "she is gone!"

"Gone?"

He laughed aloud in the gaiety and gladness of his release.

"She is gone—yes. I am a slave no more; for your love is an empire and not a bondage."

The nightingales sung in a palm-tree that a passion-flower clung to and climbed, and their song was beautiful to him.

It is true she was gone, but not gone as those who leave no trace—not gone as those who go for ever. All things spoke of her at Fiordelisa; her clothes hung on the pegs; her guitar was cast on a couch; her cigars filled an old silver ostensorio; her alpenstock and her sun umbrella leaned together in the loggia;

her legacy of orders and commands weighed on every dependant and occupied every hour. When Ioris went up there next day, and as his first act of freedom loosened the hound from his chain, he shuddered as the signs of her presence met him everywhere: they were also the menaces of her return.

Imperator gambolled to and fro with mad joy, having no prescience of future captivity that should avenge on him his present raptures. But his master could not shake off all foreboding.

As the days wore on the electric wires shocked him into unwelcome remembrance of her with messages that he cast impatiently aside, or as impatiently answered; and the post brought him long close pages of amorous words, mingled in odd union with a thousand directions as to vineyards, and brood-mares, and old furniture and new cattle, which he threw away but half read indeed, yet which served to keep ever present to him the tyrant who was absent.

Again and again he took up his pen to write the truth to her, and be free.

But again and again he deferred the ungracious task that was hard to word aright, and forbore to do more than reply that the brood-mare had foaled, or that the rains had hurt the young vines.

He was so content with her away, he dreaded to launch the bolt that might free him for ever indeed, but which might call her back fleet and ferocious, riding the whirlwind of vengeance; who could be sure?

He strove to forget her as utterly as her insistent and continual messages and letters would allow: he dared not risk the recall which he feared the truth, when told, would prove to a woman who, as his knowledge of her told him, would never passively accept dismissal, or forgive infidelity.

To Etoile he said, "She is in trouble, death is around her, she is not thinking of me. Before she dreams of returning I will tell her—that will be time enough."

She did not insist; she thought he would always do what honour needed. But when he asked her to go with him to Fiordelisa she would not—a sense of aversion and of delicacy made her shrink from the thought.

"Fiordelisa is very dear to me, because it is yours. But wait," she said to him. "Let her memory be exorcised; let all trace of her be gone, then I will come. To me it shall be so sacred; everything shall be as it was in your mother's time. You will tell me what she liked best, and we will have it so—but wait. Let all signs of the woman who has so cruelly profaned it first pass away."

He loved her for her answer, and was half glad, though

half angry, that she would not go there; yet the reply made him ill at ease; she took for granted, as so natural and so simple, that dethronement which he knew could not be compassed without tempest and revolution, perhaps not even without ruin.

When Etoile said to him with a smile, not thinking to hurt him, "Let your priest asperge it with holy water and strow rosemary, that is the old charm to cleanse places from evil possession—then I will come," he did not smile in answer. A vague fear, dark, sullen, menacing, as the temper of the woman whom he must brave, weighed on him. Again and again he thought with passionate futile regret, "Why did I not tell her all that night, when she kissed me, and I loathed her!"

It would have been so quickly told then; one flash of lightning, and the storm would have broken over his head and burst and rolled away.

Now, the storm lowering hung in the distant sky, and overshadowed the brightness of each rising day. Every morning that he rose he thought to himself, "If she should come back to-night!" The dread of her was always with him. When Tennyson makes his Guinevere say:

"Our bond is not the bond of man and wife,
This good is in it, whatso'er of ill,
It can be broken casier"—

he wrote of a world far away, in which Guinevere would meekly end in "holy house at Almesbury," a sorrowful weak woman, sore troubled with one sin, where modern ladies lightly bear a bushel such, and never feel them. But now that Guinevere needs no sanctuary, finding all she needs in the bosom of a tender and long-suffering society, and repentance and remorse lie with other archaic words embalmed in the dust of dictionaries whence no one takes them out—now, the bonds of Guinevere are the hardest the world forges, and if Launcelot dare to strike for freedom, the world will frown him back to bondage and tell him that in fealty to his traitress his duty lies, and all his honour.

Meanwhile, except for this sudden fear which sometimes started up and seized him, as in a dream of the night a cold hand seems to seize the sleeper and hold him in a horrid wakefulness, Ioris was happy as since his boyish days he never had been. A woman who loved him perfectly, questioned him never, and could not weary him, because of the frequent surprises and unfathomed depths of a nature which he still but vaguely understood though its strength and its simplicity were alike lovely to him—such a woman awoke all the joys of his youth.

He felt young once more as he hastened through the noon warmth or the evening moonlight to dream his fresh dream as he looked in the eyes of Etoile. It could not last, he knew, this rose glow of sunrise, this golden hush and glory of a love that was like daybreak; it could not last: it must pass into the limbo of dead passions as daybreak passes into the common likeness of all time, filled with the noise and trouble of the world; but whilst it lasted it was so fair; he bade it stay as Faust cried to it before him: being happy.

It was the same with her.

It was enough for her to listen for his step, to hearken for his voice, to remember his touch and his look when he was gone, to feel the very air grow lighter, the very earth seem lovelier, because he came; she had been but a Muse before, how sweet it was to stoop and become mortal! To love the life that loves you! None can know how deep a delight it is, save those who long have dwelt alone, sufficient to themselves, in the asceticism of the arts and all the cold contemptuous solitude of fame.

When he was absent, she kept his memory with her as Elaine kept the shield at Astolat, embroidering it with every beautiful fancy and with every knightly symbol; when he was there she had but one thought, to give him the peace, the pride, the joy of life so long denied him.

Being strong, she would not show her strength to him. Being proud, she would not show her pride to him. Having been called by men cold, too scornful, hard to please, it pleased her now to stoop and wait upon his smile and let him see how weak, so far as a great love is weakness, she could be at his behest.

Vain women delight to make their power felt: but Etoile, who was not vain, but who had laid her strength upon the world, as the driver his whip upon the ass's neck, and knew her strength, and had seen men bend beneath it and before it, Etoile found her joy in stooping lowly in meek obedience.

He was not wiser, greater, goodlier than many another no doubt; she had found him in his bondage, and known him in his weakness; he was not lord of himself nor yet of others; but he was what she loved; the only creature that she loved; the only life that was dear to her, and that taught her the mere common joys of earth, and made her know the sweetness of human lips and the light of human eyes; she had dwelt alone and apart, and now she lived for him; she fancied that for this sweet surprise of human mastery no payment of her whole life could be enough.

Out of the deep abundance of her pity love had arisen, and she now wondered that she had lived—not knowing love.

It was like a trance that fell upon her: a trance whose visions are of heaven, whilst those who stand by and look on say, this is death.

The conflict that was before her was one that needed to be fought in mud and mire, with rough weapons, with harsh thrusts, with merciless coarse blows on low and craven foes; but of the conflict she thought nothing; she only was happy,—with her hand in his.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE world had grown quite empty round them all; all the idlers and pleasure seekers had flown away; in Rome there were no sounds but of the fall of the fountains and the thrill of the guitars at nightfall.

Lady Cardiff was the last to go.

She came to bid Etoile farewell one day at Rocaldi towards the close of the day; she guessed much, but she inquired nothing, being a woman who knew the world. Only airily and indifferently she said at the close of her visit—

“Do you mean to stay here all the summer? My dear, it will try your health. These grand old gardens harbour death, you know. At least you will die if you wish to live, and live if you wish to die; people always do: a young mother will die as she gives her child its first kiss, and a hospital for incurables will remain full to its roof! Very odd; the gods *do* jest with us. *Apropos*—I conclude you know old Lady Archiestoune is dead in London? Our dear Joan is gone over: filial piety, you know; some people do say it’s the Messina Bridge instead. Anyhow, she is gone. How comfortable Ioris must be, like a boy out of school, I should think. I suppose you see him still sometimes? Now I wonder if he will let her come back? he ought not; it is his one chance of salvation, no one has that sort of chance twice.

‘There is a tide, which, taken at the flood,
Leads on to fortune.’

True statement, but most involved metaphor, like most of Shakespeare’s. A tide cannot *lead* you anywhere; it may *float* you.”

Lady Cardiff dropped her eyeglass, having seen what she feared in Etoile’s changing eyes.

"Come and see my great palms," said Etoile, and led her out to the gardens where two of the stateliest palms of Rome towered in the light as they stood perchance in distant days of Horace.

Lady Cardiff lifted her eyeglass to them.

"I don't care for any vegetables," she said, as she looked. "I am like Dr. Johnson : I like the street posts and the people that walk past them ; still they are fine trees. I can see that. But only look how they are stifled under those passion-flowers ; quite an allegory, isn't it ; you should write a poem on it. Won't you have the passion-flowers cut down ?"

"And my poor nightingales that sing all night in the passion-flowers ? oh, no !"

"Passion-flowers and nightingales ! Most poetic !" said Lady Cardiff almost crossly. "But I wish the air were better, my dear ; you will excuse me if I am prosaic. A well-trapped drain is the best poetry after all."

"The air is beautiful," said Etoile with a smile that made her face at once tender and thoughtful, and full of that nameless light, like a flame shining through alabaster, which only a great joy gives.

"Poison !" said Lady Cardiff, sharply.

Then on a sudden impulse she touched Etoile's forehead with her lips.

"God bless you, my love ! Cut the passion-flowers down ; they will only choke the palms, believe me, only choke them. I wish you were not going to stay here with the nightingales ; but you are the best judge of the air that suits you, and you are your own mistress, and I am not an old friend to have the right to scold you. I wish I were. Adieu !"

"What business had he to grow his passion-flowers there ?" she thought, with anger to herself, as her carriage rolled out of the ilex-shadows of Rocaldi. "If he will have strength enough, it will all come right ; but he will not have strength : he will let that black-browed jade return, and there will be nothing but misery out of it all for the innocent one. It is always so. How loyal she is to him, too—not a word of his name ! Dear, dear, what a pity she came ! She was so content, and so calm, and so cold, and so wrapped in her dreams and creations, and now—he will have no strength. It is she who will be sacrificed, and she will live and die with a broken heart on that bare rock of hers, all alone in the middle of the open sea, and our dear Joan will count up her money, and grin to the end of her days triumphant. Lord, what fools men are ! O the pity of it, the pity of it, Iago !"

Then Lady Cardiff went home with the tears in her eyes, and almost could have cried with rage and vexation : so much did

she take it to heart that, though the German Embassy had sent her some choicest four-year old Johannisberg, and "Figaro" had just come in, and there was a telegram to say that Lord Cardiff was punished for his sins with the gout, she could enjoy none of these good things, but sat silent and out of spirits until her servants told her the hour drew nigh for the train to the north.

A watcher less merciful and as keen of sight—one who did not come beneath the ilex-shadows of Rocaldi, but nevertheless kept vigil on what passed there—remained down in the city throughout the sultry season; Lady Joan had left her watchdog chained by the Forum Trajano.

In their grim, dusky, dusty corner the three sisters remained to copy canvases and panels, and be cited as instances of filial love, because they sent their old parents to a lodging by the sea.

"Such dear, good daughters!" said Society, with its last breath, flying itself away, whilst the poor old father, tormented by sun and sand and fleas and gnats, tottering about on the shore with his deaf wife upon his arm, felt that Regal and Goneril might have been better to bear than these Cordelias who kept the purse-strings, and measured the whisky, and scolded from morn to eve, and heaped up their own devoted sacrifices like coals of fire on his head. Lear after all had much to be thankful for, thought Lord George: Lear at any rate was left alone.

The sisters had hoped that the wide empty chambers and the majestic solitudes of Fiordelisa would have been placed at their disposal, in her absence, by their dear friend who loved them with a thousand loves; part of the summer there had been part of their perennial payment, and to stay there in her absence could have been no impropriety with their mother's knitting-needles and their father's crutch in the antechamber. But their dear friend had gone, kissing them all indeed, but making otherwise no sign. Lady Joan did not choose to have even so harmless and faithful a creature as her Cerberus installed ever so temporarily in her throne—and Ioris said nothing. Ioris did not even ask them up for a day. So their hopes fell fruitless, as they had seen so many hopes fall, knowing well what hell it is in waiting to abide, dancing attendance on the whims and wills, caprices and commands, of other people; and they stayed down in their close, pent-up old palace amidst the evil smells of the city with no other consolation than that they would have time to finish copying frescoes of Domenicheno ordered by Lord Hebrides out of good nature and clannish feeling, and that they could perhaps be still more sure of what he, whom it was their task to watch, should do in absence of the one who claimed his life.

The task was difficult, though they deemed it easy. Ioris, knowing he was watched, turned restive and put out his wit to baffle them. They were no match for him in that social diplomacy when he chose to exercise his skill. He was as courteous, as cordial, as compassionate as ever with these poor toiling women whom he really pitied; but when they tried to spy on him, he baffled them.

He met their questions with serene indifference; he parried their curiosity with calm evasions.

"It is what they deserve, if they persecute me," he said to himself; and he beat them with their own weapons.

What affair was it of theirs?

Once or twice he went and watched Marjory at work in Sta. Maria degli Angeli on her Domenichino, and gave her counsel with the delicate and unerring taste in art which characterised him. Sometimes he sat with them in their own dull, dreary chamber; when he did so it was with intent to blind them.

"Etoile? I really can tell you but little. She is shut up in her villa, absorbed on some great work for next season's Salon," he would answer them, and say it so indifferently and naturally, that it almost deceived them. Almost, not quite, for Marjory, whose soul was sick with haunting dread, would now and then get a hired carriage to take her out of the gates along the dusty highroads and the yellow grass to where the ilex thickets of Rocaldi hung in the ruby glow of sunset light, a green oasis in the burnt-up desert, and went about under the walls till twilight fell, and once, twice, thrice she saw a form she knew, and heard the ring of a horse's hoof, and Ioris passed her, not noticing a woman's figure low bent in the meadows, as though gathering herbs.

Then Marjory went home, pressing the jagged iron of hungry jealousy in her breast, and wrote a letter to her bosom friend away in England, and added in a postscript, as though carelessly, "Io is quite well, I believe. We really see nothing of him now you are away. They say he spends all his time at Etoile's villa—the archæological picture, I suppose! *Au revoir, dearest!*"

Lady Joan got the letter when she was sitting alone in the little house in Mayfair.

Her grandmother was dead, which was odious, because she could not go to Prince's, and show off her skating, which was admirable, nor go anywhere else that was amusing, and was bored to death with her uncles and aunts and relatives generally, and grew quite pale with having to do propriety so long unrelieved by any touch of colour or diversion. She had sold two painted coffers she had lent to a loan collection, and she had sent some lace and uncut garnets to a Stafford House charity,

and she had gone to a Westminster Service with the head of the Opposition, and she had visited the Royal Academy with Tom Tonans and his wife, and had altogether been so steeped in the Jordan of Respectability that she felt, as soon as she could get out of her mourning, she might dance the Carmagnole with perfect impunity wheresoever she liked. Still Jordan had bored her. It bores most people. And though this bi-annual dipping in it was deemed necessary by Mr. Challoner, she felt that never—no, never again—could she go through it; she had always felt so whenever she had bathed; yet she had always returned to dip afresh, being a woman in whom after all prudence was stronger than preferences.

Now, as she sat in her bedroom she read the postscript to her watchdog's warning. She had had a letter by the same post from Ioris; she had read it first of all; she now seized it and read it again. Re-perused by the lurid light of that postscript's suggestions, the letter seemed to her no lover's effusion—seemed cold, brief, unsatisfactory. It told her that the mare had foaled and that the vines were healthy: hardly anything else. The *devoto ed affettuoso*, *Ireneo*, of the signature seemed to her at the end to be scrawled off, as if the writer were glad to be rid of an unwelcome task. A million suspicions darted out like little stings from between the lines and seemed to hiss at her.

All day long and every day as she bathed in Jordan, as she went in her crape to hear the will read, uninterested because there was hardly anything to leave, and what there was went to her father and aunts; as she smothered her yawns while the head of the Opposition discussed a crabbed and vexed passage of Dante with her; as she toiled through the Academy, where nothing interested her, because she only liked the old masters, the dear old masters, who could be bought in a garret and sold at a profit; as she travailed over documents, reports, and accounts, to persuade the recalcitrant shareholders, and fascinate unwilling presidents, and effect herculean transfers, all day long—in everything she did there was always one wasp's sting always festering in her—the fear of what might be doing in Rome.

Call him she dared not.

She had just brought her transfer to boiling point. She had just mended and painted her broken jar. She had just managed so beautifully, that all the sheep that were silly as swine would go over the steep all alone, and the shepherds be safe with their fleeces. If he came, all would be ruined: he was such a fool. Over the steep he would go himself; he would break the mended pot, he would throw the soup away as it boiled. He would even sell Fiordelisa. Yet every hour of the day, smiling on dowagers, listening to deans, and talking of Dante, every

day plunging at morn into finance, and washing in Jordan at even, every hour the terror thrilled through her—if he should be with Etoile!

She did not much fear it, because to be blind with a supreme vanity is like being shut in a windowless room lined with looking-glasses. Yet the vague dread was there. At the bark of her watch-dog it sprang up full armed.

She was alone in her bed-room that looked over the smoke-blackened roofs of Mayfair, with sooty sparrows twittering on the sill. With a pang of passionate longing she thought of her bedroom at Fiordelisa, the roses clinging round it, the sweet azure sky beyond it, the old sculptured shields above it, a thrush singing on an orange bough, and the voice of her lover calling from the old grey court *Mia cara, che fai tu?* She was not a tender-natured woman, nor one to be touched by sudden memories, but at that moment the hot fierce tears rushed to her eyes and throat. At that moment, for once, she loved with love, and not with self-love; she felt that all the world and its small gains, and its shallow hypocrisies, would be well lost to lean upon his breast, to look into his eyes.

“If she dare take him from me!” she said in her teeth, and a bitterer oath than men can swear was smothered in the heat and harshness of her soul.

Take him from her!—

Weak women would have fled to Rome, leaving the soup boiling over, the pot unglazed, the sheep unsheared; but she was strong.

She washed the scorching tears from her eyes, she swallowed the choking fury in her throat, she put on her crape gown and went downstairs to where her lord perused the newspapers, and her aunts sat penning letters of thanks for condolence in bereavement.

“I have heard from Io,” she said frankly, with that frankness which never deserted her even on the shores of Jordon and in the house in Mayfair. “I have heard from Io; he wants to come over; do you think we could get the transfer signed this week? I should like to give him a pleasant surprise if he *do* come.”

Mr. Challoner laid down the newspaper and considered gravely:

“I think we could,” he said, after a pause. “I will go down to Cannon Street and see if I can hurry them on: is he really coming? Well, the change might do him good; he is not very strong.”

For Mr. Challoner also could read between the lines, and wanted himself very much to get free to go to Germany for those waters which were so vitally necessary for his little

daughter's health, and also he was fully alive to the fact that his wife's maiden aunts, stately gentlewomen of old-fashioned notions, were within hearing at their writing-table. Therefore he spoke with that cordial good humour and good understanding which he always put on when they were washing in Jordan.

"I will go with you," said his wife, and turned to her aunts. "You will excuse me, won't you, dear aunties? It is a business affair in which Robert and I are very interested for the sake of some friends, a sad speculation of poor Io's that I am afraid will not turn out very well, even with the very best that we can do."

"Of course we have nothing to do with the affairs of the Prince Ioris, nothing," explained Mr. Challoner to the ladies at the writing-table, as he was in the habit of explaining it to Society. "Nothing at all, poor fellow; but there has been a good deal of English capital put into this affair in Sicily, and so it seems one's duty, really one's duty——"

And Mr. Challoner took out his handkerchief and polished his eyeglasses, not ending his sentence, knowing all the virtue that lies in the vague.

"I don't really know how Ioris stands," continued Mr. Challoner with an air of protest. "One is always so delicate on these matters with friends; but I am afraid his good nature has been abused, his imagination run away with—— Co-directors? Yes, we are co-directors, it is true, but he has assumed personal responsibilities that I never would have done; against my advice; quite against my advice."

Mr. Challoner sighed and gazed into vacancy.

"Is he so fond of speculation, then?" said one of the ladies at the writing-table.

"It is his patriotism," said Mr. Challoner; in the Temple of the Virtues every motive was always labelled with the very highest title procurable in nomenclature.

"Oh!" said the gentlewomen together. They had lived in London and Paris all their lives and had, before this, heard patriotism used as a reason for a variety of things, from a minister's keeping in office against the will of the country, to a newspaper's writing a country into bloodshed and bankruptcy: they were quite aware of the word's elasticity.

"It is Io's patriotism," echoed the Lady Joan. "If he thought he would do the country any good by it, he would jump down into a pit and let it swallow him like Curtius. It is very fine, you know, all that; but it does not pay. I always tell him he will get no recompense, and end in the poor-house. My dear Robert, get a hansom cab, quick!"

Then she put on her crape veil, and drove with her husband to the City to hurry agents and secretaries, and get her mended pot baked in the muffle of European exchanges, and drawn out

as new pottery by those modern masters of destiny—the brokers.

“She seems to think of nothing but business,” said one of the gentlewomen left at the writing-table.

Guinevere might in her jealousy throw the diamonds in the moat. Lady Joan knew better.

Business was dear to her, dear were all its pastimes and its profits, she mewed herself in close misty dens of offices through the sweet summer days and condemned herself to the dusty, dreary, noisy streets of London, when the roses were all in bloom at Fiordelisa, that she might keep her mended pot sailing bravely and unbroken down the stream of speculation with the iron pots of safer and richer enterprise. To discern *hausse* and *baisse*, to watch the rise and fall of gold, to correct the proofs of a prospectus and see a knot of shareholders smile, to captivate brokers and commission agents, and to be up to her eyes in telegrams and despatches—this was as the very breath of life to her, even in the misty, murky, sultry atmosphere of the City in midsummer. But chiefly was it so sweet to her because business forged the fetters that a tired love could not break. Business wove the shroud in which a dead love could be imprisoned in its grave, her own and no one else’s, even though, dead, dead, dead !

The shrewd hard sense that underlay her amorous vanity told her that passion soon or late calls to deaf ears ; pipes, and none dance ; lifts its lips and meets no kiss ; but that the woman who has interwoven herself with a man’s fortunes, and bound his hands to hers with the hempen ropes of commonplace, every day cares and troubles, has entered the very fibre of his life as the lichen enters the bark of the tree.

The lichen may kill the tree ere its time, but what of that ? They are together till the end comes and the axe hews down both together.

So she crushed the rage, and the fear, and the longing, all into her heart in silence, and drove down beside her lord to the City. For one short savage instant the Cleopatra had leapt up in her to o’erleap sea and mountains, and reach Rome at a bound.

But the *dame du comptoir* was still stronger than the Cleopatra, and she went and worked in the City ; then sent a telegram—instead.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

WHILST in her hot heavy morning garb, in the sooty air and the gaslit little den of her agent's office, sitting with brokers and lawyers, she spun her threads about her distant lover as the spider spins in the dark to catch the firefly that makes love in the starlight, Etoile, in her cool white garments, was walking amidst the blue lilies that filled the grass under her ilex groves. The chimes of a church were sounding near ; the bells of goats cropping the honeysuckle in the field beyond, rang in unison softly ; the acacias were full of blossoms and of bees ; the strong voluptuous heat lay on the land like sleep on the eyes of a tired dreamer.

She walked on, her white gown trailing on the flowering grasses ; she gathered a lily, and put it in her breast ; she held a fan of green palm leaves between her and the setting sun ; a ripe fruit tumbled and rolled before her feet ; light and silence were about her.

"How good is God!" she thought. "How beautiful is life!"

His shadow fell through the sunshine, his step came through the flowers, his eyes smiled down into hers, and his lips touched her.

"Dreaming always!" he murmured.

"Dreaming of you! Are you jealous of that?"

"No ; since your dreams are my prisoners."

He wound his arm about her ; he moved the sultry air with her fan of palms. They strayed through the flowering grasses together—their path was sweet with crushed herbs and dropped roses.

"You are happy?" they asked one another.

"I am happy!" each answered the other.

She said the whole truth with no latent thought to mar it when she said that she was happy. When he said the same words, a dark and restless care was tugging at his heartstrings, which, though he often forced it away, yet seldom wholly left him.

Ruin seemed near him, and vengeance nearer still. When in the sultry noons he wearily pored over the papers and accounts of the many enterprises and speculations into which friendship had allured him, he only succeeded in making his eyes and his heart ache ; when the electric wires shocked his

nerves with unwelcome reminder that though his friend was absent in the flesh, in spirit she still stood at his elbow, he wearily cursed the inventive genius of his generation, and felt a breathless impatience and oppression, such as the magician felt who had forgot the spell by which alone the shadows he had summoned could be bidden to dissolve and vanish.

"She would never come back—all would be well;" so he said to himself, being of a nature that was sanguine even whilst apprehensive.

He trusted in some vague way to some kind star that would control her course, and turn it far from his.

Meantime he did nothing : he was happy, and the peril was distant ; and he ceased to go to Fiordelisa. Her memories were too present there, like the scent of sandal wood that is stronger than the scent of roses, and cannot be driven out, do what you will ; and the memories stifled him, and he hated them. They were only deodorised when the hand of Etoile lay in his.

The old hereditary love of his father's home was always in him, but the place was poisoned to him : when he looked at its threshing-floors, its levelled lawns, its freshly-cleared and naked gardens, its hotbeds and plantations and stock yards, the price which all these things had cost seemed written on them in ruinous figures ; and through the solitude, when the throb of the English farm-engines ceased for a moment, he still seemed to hear the voice of his tyrant crying out, "Io, Io!" as the voice of the horse-leech cries "Give, give!"

It used to be so beautiful, so shadowy, so still before she came, he thought, and felt that his people had been right when they had wanted to take their axes and hew in pieces the machines that she had brought, yelling and vomiting fire and black smoke into the sweet, serene, classic woodland silence of that fair hillside.

The noisy, fussy, screaming engine, blackening the blue sky and searing the flowery grass, seemed her meet emblem.

He sighed and left the place, and went to where a woman clad in white was painting in a fragrant solitary place, with the blue passion-flower curling about the casements.

"Teach me to forget all in my life save yourself," he murmured.

And Etoile listened to his prayer and let him steep himself in welcome oblivion, when, to be wise, she should have harried and lashed him with remembrance till he should have risen and stood free.

But then she loved him.

Women who in their warmest passions love but themselves cannot understand this utter obedience to an unwise will, this

tender submission to an unreasoning weakness, this absolute self-negation.

Yet nothing less is love.

Meanwhile this great submission given him intoxicated him like new wine : he thought himself, as he jestingly said, the magician that had called the solitary star down from heaven to earth, and made it his.

"Whilst you shone aloof, and aloft, above this world, all the while you were waiting for me !" he said, with a smile, that she did not see was too victorious.

Had she been a lowlier woman, perhaps he would not have been so careless of her peace through being so proud of her glory. As it was, he, so long a slave, was never tired of feeling himself a king in a vaster and nobler dominion than any he had ever known.

This woman would have stood haughty and indifferent before a howling world, unblenching and serene. He knew that he, alone, could make her grow pale as a chidden child, grow flushed as a sun-kissed rose.

"The world will forget you, hidden here," he said one day.

Etoile smiled.

"Let it forget me. What matter?"

"No, you must not let it forget you. I love that ring of light about your head that men call fame ; it becomes you."

"The ring of light makes the eyes ache sometimes and sometimes makes the path under one's feet dark enough," she answered him, and thought with a little pang, "Is it less myself he loves than that halo about my name?"

For it is possible to be the rival of one's self ; and a vague apprehension touched her.

"Do you know," she said, dreamily, "sometimes the ring of light seems to me like that chain of fireflies that cruel Mexican women wear at their balls and feasts—for every point of light a little life dies in pain ; so, in such notoriety as we who are famous get, with each glitter some little sweetness of peace, or joy, or obscurity, perishes. Our light is made of dying things."

"That is pretty but foolish, my dear," he answered her. "Fame is like wealth or rank or power ; it gilds and burnishes the dulness of life. Perhaps I never should have looked at you had you been only a mere woman—not Etoile !"

He meant nothing, yet the words stung her.

They seemed to her to say that his joy over and in her was rather triumph than tenderness—rather the pursuit of pride than of love. Her heart ached with a sudden longing to be the lowliest creature that lived, but only loved by him for herself, and not for the uncertain fitful light that the world's rays shed on her.

"Whenever," had wise Voightel once said to her "whenever (if ever) you do love, you will be for a few months the most happy, and for ever after the saddest of women." The first part of the prophecy had come to pass, and she had proved its sweet truth; now and then, she thought of the latter half with a chill vague apprehension.

Not that she had any sense of the real perils that lay for her in the worn-out passion of another woman, which was cast behind her, she thought, like a crushed, killed snake.

Whilst she dreamed thus amidst the passion-flowers opening their purple hearts to the sun, she was too happy and too unwise to measure or even perceive the coarse and common perils that environed her, or to know the danger that lay for her in an absent enemy who seemed to her too low to merit any kind of fear.

She had found Ioris an unwilling bondsman; whilst yet a stranger he had let her see his galled weariness of the net that held him; now that he loved her, it no more would have seemed possible for him to desert her for his tyrant's service than it would have seemed possible for a nightingale, freed of the trap, to re-enter it by choice instead of singing his song of rejoicing in the moonlight, fluttering free wings. She never thought of his absent mistress as any peril to himself or her. He was his own master, he was free; he loved her, he had shaken off him an unworthy and galling servitude; it never passed across her fancy that Lady Joan was still a danger for them both.

She knew that he wrote to England, but this he naturally accounted for by his own entangled affairs. "They can ruin me," he said, under his breath, and would not tell her more clearly, save that they had his signatures to many obligations, and had drawn him into many embarrassments that could not be lightly disentangled nor cleared away.

He never told the truth of his affairs to Etoile, because he thought her too visionary to care for or to comprehend the entanglements of finance; partly also because he was always in his own heart ashamed of having been caught in those entanglements, and was conscious that for the descendant of a line of warrior nobles, and of knightly princes, the questionable honour of the Bourse, and of its legalised gambling, was not wise or dignified, or even clean of conscience enough to be fitting.

"Make me what you think me," he had said to her; and whilst with her he was all she thought him. Away from her, the lower aims and the coarser efforts in which his late years had been steeped by one evil influence might resume their sway, but in her presence the impressionable temper of Ioris made him truly rise to the heights on which he could meet and unite with hers.

Once she had said to him, "If they can ruin you, as you say, cut through all these nets of speculation, these gordian knots of obligation; cut through them all, let it cost what it may, and come out from them with your honour safe and free, if it leave you poor."

He was tempted to follow her counsel; he was tempted to cast Fiordelisa and his last remnants of fortune into the hands of the harpies of finance, and rescue by such loss at least his manhood and his liberty.

But his temper was too hesitating for so irrevocable and headlong a plunge into the unknown. He temporised; he hoped; he waited; he trusted; he dallied with danger, believing that thus he exorcised it.

"You do not understand, my angel," he would say to her, and close her lips to silence with his kisses when she would have urged him to say more. He told her little, because these things beside her seemed to him so poor, and gross, and mean; he felt also that he had been in a large measure the dupe of circumstances that he should never have allowed to gather round him, and he did not care for the one living creature who saw in him all that the ideal of his youth had once dreamed of becoming, to be roused from her faith and her dreams to hear the common sorry story of fortunes embarrassed by unwise enterprise and by foolish credulities.

He could not bear to lower himself in her eyes. If he had understood her more truly, he would have known that nothing would have turned her from him; that she would have forgiven him any crime, even what is harder to forgive than crime—any folly, or even any faithlessness. But he did not understand aright; and so he erred and went on in silence.

And all the while through the hot summer, written words, or words brought by the electric wires, startled him from his dreams, and stung him as mosquitoes sting, the sting making him rise hot, irritable, and wearily awakened.

She who was absent, knew how to send such words; blows to rivet loosened bolts, baits to allure vague ambitions, threats to alarm apprehensive honour, thorns to pierce and inflame careless indolence; words that, like the pale, invisible hosts of the mosquitoes, gave no rest.

Over and over again he was on the point of severing for ever the ropes that held the barque of his fate to the quicksands of speculation. But ere ever the resolve could become accomplished fact, his tyrant, ever with him even in absence, cried, "Hold!" and he paused, and doubted, and waited, as he waited to tell her the truth, until for ever it became too late.

Etoile knew but little of such things; what poet or artist does? and she knew his love of his own old place, and dreaded to urge on him any haste in action which might imperil it.

"Even if they ruin you I have enough," she said once : he kissed her, but said, "My angel, that would not do ; I could not live upon a woman ; let me free Fiordelisa in my own way."

Meantime, her art seemed but little to her now.

She sketched his features again and again, modelled them in clay, and never tired of that ; but those long, glad, pure days of absolute absorption in her work, when she had used to have no regret but to see the light fade as the sun set, those were over for ever.

Although her physicians had ordered her to rest for a year, she did not now obey them ; with his words came the desire to do something more beautiful for him than she had ever done for Art alone, something with which his fancy and his features should mingle, and his very being be embalmed. With the true artist, Love finds an involuntary utterance in Art, as the passion of the bird finds utterance in its song.

In her villa there was a large chamber with tapestried walls, jutting out into the garden, with all the rank riot of lush grass and wild flowers round about it ; here she made her studio, and here, when he was not with her, she passed all her hours, like Raffaele, seeing but one face, paint what she would, in that absolute constancy and absorption of every thought, of every breath, of every fancy throughout absence, which is the true fidelity of a life. Did he ever realise all that this gave him, all that this meant, then and hereafter ? Scarcely : with him love was a thing half of the sentiment, half of the senses, and he smiled sometimes to see it become to her holy as religion, deep-rooted as the hope of immortality.

"Who should ever love you, as you love ?" he thought ; and then he kissed her, and what need was there of any subtleties of thought or word ?

Passion imperious, exacting, cruel, domineering, had long preyed upon his life, but passion tender, obedient, intense, and full of that humility to which a great love bends down the strongest, was strange to him. There were times when he half-feared it as in the old days of visions men half-feared the angels that came to them in the night.

That first fancy of her, as half a Muse and half a saint, was with him still, and though he had made the Muse see no face but his own, and the saint droop to a love all of earth, and was glad and triumphant, yet with a man's inconsistency he was tempted to regret that he had not passed by, and left them as they were ; "some day she will reproach me," he said to himself.

Perhaps some such vague dissatisfaction with himself moved Pygmalion, and some wish that he had left the marble marble came to him when for him alone the statue bent and blushed.

To Etoile, who knew herself well to be neither Muse nor saint, but only a woman to whom mere human joys had long been strangers, the happiness that he had brought her seemed worth the loss of life itself ; love to the looker-on may be blind, unwise, unworthily bestowed, a waste, a sacrifice, a crime, yet none the less is love, alone, the one thing that, come weal or woe, is worth the loss of every other thing ; the one supreme and perfect gift of earth, in which all common things of daily life become transfigured and divine, and perhaps of all the many woes that priesthoods have wrought upon humanity, none have been greater than this false teaching, that love can ever be a sin. To the sorrow and the harm of the world, the world's religions have all striven to make men and women shun and deny their one angel as a peril or a shame ; but religions cannot strive against nature, and when the lovers see each other's heaven in each other's eyes, they know the supreme truth that one short day together is worth a lifetime's glory.

Etoile walking through the blue lilies of the grass in the warm air, listening for his step, looked back at her past that had not known this joy with wonder and with pity. "I thought I saw so clearly and so far in those old years," she thought, "and yet I never saw all that I missed."

"Nay, dear," said Ioris, with a smile when once she said this to him, "to give that insight the magician must come."

And he was glad and proud that he was that magician, and she let him see the power of his wand too much.

"Since it pleases him to know his power, what matter?" she thought. "I have been strong against the world ; strong in my art and in my labours, strong to keep my armour bright in the contest with men : the world has called me too strong ; I have earned the right to be weak."

He had been a slave so long ; it pleased her to crown him a king.

Even when he was tyrannous, capricious, or unjust, as a man in his love will often be, she bent her head to the yoke, and was silent and patient as Griseldis. "He has suffered so much," she thought. "There is much to efface for him, so much to be made up to him." So she set herself to atone to him for the cruelty of another, as though it had been her own.

When a word that might have seemed to him too vain, or too arrogant, sprang to her lips, she repressed it unspoken, lest it should seem to bear any likeness of his tyrant in it. She wanted to give him back all the pride, the self-esteem, the dignity of thought, of which his mistress had so long robbed him : to strengthen his hands she effaced herself.

She had been proud all her life. She gave him her pride, now, as she would have given him the kingdoms of earth had she had them.

There is a story in an old poet's forgotten writings of a woman who was queen when the world was young, and reigned over many lands, and loved a captive, and set him free, and thinking to hurt him less by seeming lowly, came down from her throne and laid her sceptre in the dust, and passed amongst the common maidens that drew water at the well, or begged at the city gate, and seemed as one of them, giving him all and keeping nought herself: "so will he love me more," she thought; but he, crowned king, thought only of the sceptre and the throne, and having those, looked not amongst the women at the gate, and knew her not, because what he had loved had been a queen. Thus she, self-discrowned, lost both her lover and her kingdom; and a wise man amongst the throngs said to her, "Nay, you should have kept aloof upon your golden seat, and made him feel your power to deal life or death, and fretted him long, and long kept him in durance and in doubt, you, meanwhile, far above. For men are light creatures as the moths are."

But Etoile had never read this story then, nor, had she seen it, would she have read the parable.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

ONE summer day tidings came whose pain touched her even in her paradise—the tidings that gentle, gracious, courtly Lord Archie had been drowned during a sudden storm, in which his pleasure schooner had gone down, beating off the Isle of Jura, where he had been shooting on the moor.

"Dead!" said Etoile, with white lips: death seemed so impossible for that charming idler, that gentle wit, that graceful saunterer through the smooth and sunny ways of a philosophic life.

"Dead!" said Ioris; and his eyes clouded and his brows grew dark, for he foresaw a darker shadow cast by this death across his own path.

Lord Archie had been the sole fragile tie that had bound his daughter to any kind of truth or reason; before her father, falsehood had always halted on her lips. Calm and indifferent though his habits were, his heart was loyal and his temper true. Ioris had always felt that the dead man had held his tigress in a manner in leash; and now on his table in the offices in the

Trastevere there was lying a passionate summons to him in cypher, flashed in lightning from his tyrant, crying to him from across the mountains and the sea :

“Come to me —— come !”

That day their solitude seemed less sweet ; even the sunshine of the radiant painting chamber seemed to grow dull ; clouds heaved up from the south and the east ; a sullen sirocco was blowing, and the golden hearts and blue eyes of the passion-flowers filled with sand, the tears of the desert.

“I cannot write to her?” said Etoile, and hesitated, and looked in his face.

“No,” said Ioris abruptly, and was silent.

She wound her hand in his.

“Would you let me write to her?—it seems heartless not to write, and I might tell her the truth of us, in some way, not to hurt her.”

“No !” said Ioris. “No, I forbid you ——”

Her head drooped. She did not urge him ; she did not chafe against the tyranny of the words, because she fancied that such tyranny was sweet to him after long servitude.

Those who know themselves strong can bear to be submissive. She was strong with the world ; she was only weak with him.

He drew her arms about his throat.

“*Ma femme ne peut pas écrire à ma maîtresse,*” he murmured in the language which they most often spoke.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

ONE morning Etoile was in her painting room. It was about three o'clock, and fresh rains had cooled the air. In the fields beyond her gardens the people were at vintage ; their merry cries came to her mellowed by distance, with the laughter of the children and the heavy roll of the grape waggons creaking down the vine alleys.

She had been working two hours. He was away in the city. Her painting had come forth from the canvas into life—it was a scene from the life of Sordello.

And in the face of Sordello she had given the face of Ioris ; and the work was delightful to her—not now, as of old, for Art's sake, but for his.

She had left off working for a moment and thrown herself on

a low couch ; the sea breeze came in through the passion-flowers and stirred the folds of her white linen dress and lifted the hair from her forehead ; the swallows were flying before the open casements.

"The summer will soon be going, so soon this summer will be a thing of the past," she thought ; and the thought smote her with a sudden pang in the light, the fragrance, the stillness that were round her.

This one beloved sweet summer !

Shine the sun as it would, and bring forth its flowers and its joys as it might, no summer ever could be quite like this one, which was fading. The vine-dressers beyond the trees were dancing and shouting with gladness because the grapes were ripe and the summer dying ; but each reddened leaf to her was a regret, each purple cluster to her was like a lament : the summer so soon would be dead.

The summer that had had no precursor, that could have no successor, like itself.

The door of the studio opened suddenly ; Ioris entered in silence, and quickly crossed the marble floor and threw himself beside her. He looked worn and very pale ; he knelt at her feet and covered her hands with kisses.

"My love, I must leave you !" he murmured. "I have to go to Paris ; I shall be absent only a little while, but—but——"

Etoile thrust him backward with a sudden movement, in which all the blood and life, and heart and soul, that were in her, seemed to leap in flame to her cheek.

"You are going—to her !"

"As I live I am not !" cried Ioris ; and he rose, too, in as passionate a scorn as her own. "What ! you insult me by thinking I would insult *you*, and follow that woman. No, I go to Paris on a matter that concerns my honour, that is all, to try and save something for all those who trusted me in this accursed Sicilian folly. As for her, she is in Scotland—how can you doubt me so !"

She caught his hands convulsively ; she grew as white as death.

"You will not go to her—you will not ?"

"By my dead mother's memory, if you wish I will swear to you—No ! By the heaven above us, No—ten thousand times."

She sank down in a passion of weeping, and piteously clung to him, whilst all the sweet glow of sunshine went round before her blinded eyes in rings of fire.

"Oh, my love, my life, why leave me ? Have I failed in anything ? Am I in fault ? Are you not happy ?——"

He kissed her eyelids, and raised her in his arms.

"We are too happy ;—the gods always grudge it. Do you

think I would leave you for a little thing? I must go for my honour. I must go to save those who trusted me; there is no other way. Listen, try and be calm; I shall be back before our passion-flowers change colour."

Then his voice faltered, and a quick sob caught his breath; as he held her to his heart she felt the hot tears fall from his eyes upon her.

Nor was he lying then. He spoke the truth as he meant it, as he saw it. It changed later on in his hands as a gem that no man can control changes colour. He had resisted the passionate prayers of the absent woman who besought him; he had let her entreaties beat themselves vainly on his deadness and deafness, like fretting waves on the beaten sand; he had been irresponsible, and cold, and unmoved, as only a dead passion that is buried in the charnel house of disgust ever can be. But though the truth was still untold to her, far away in the North his Guinevere had felt the chill sickly shudder that runs through the hot leaping blood of the woman who is jealous—and forsaken.

She had woven, she had spun, in the dust and the darkness of the great city: she had pulled the threads; she had woven like Fate.

He would not know whither he came, but he would come. So she said to herself. She wove like Fate.

The irises of May had been in bloom when his tyrant had left him free.

The white dahlias and asters of September were in bloom when he broke the spell of a joy too great to last, and went northward.

The memories of those sweet, shining, sultry months lay like sleeping children in the heart of Etoile, and until thought itself should perish in her, they could never die.

It is so much to have been once entirely happy; never can it altogether pass away.

Yet when he went, it seemed to him that she died; the latter half of the old wise man's prophecy began to realise itself as a cruel spell works slowly out on a doomed thing.

She had utter faith in him.

As he had sworn, so she was sure it was; she never wronged him by the baseness of any disbelief. To doubt him would have seemed to her the foulest insult.

When she touched the colours and the brushes, with which, all her life before, she had been able to summon spirits and angels at her will, and forget the world around her, it was now only to endeavour to perfect his portrait, or call the soft darkness of his eyes up on some blank piece of panel or of canvas. Then she would drop her brush wearily, and lean her head on

her hands, and weep bitterly : bereft of him she was twice bereaved, for with him also had gone her art.

A vague fear, too, lay for ever on her, like a stone on a living blossom.

She would not wrong him with any doubt of his fidelity ; yet he told her nothing ; she could not tell what toils were not entangling, what dangers not encompassing, him.

He had gone to save his honour : if his honour made shipwreck ?

More than once she was sorely tempted to go also to Paris. It was her home ; she had a full and natural right to return there ; all her interests, indeed, were suffering from her long absence. Yet she did not go ; she feared that it might seem to him as if she followed him, suspected him, spied upon him, importuned him. He had had too much of that weary insult. She would not wrong him so ; therefore she stayed.

The days and the weeks of that time were ever afterwards to Etoile, looking back on them, but a dull blank, a chaos of pain, such as the time of a great sickness seems in memory to the sick man looking back to it.

She was herself ill in body—so ill that physicians grew grave as they looked at her and murmured of the Roman fever, and felt that there was some mental ill beside of which they knew not.

She grew thinner, paler, weaker every day ; every night wept more on her sleepless pillows ; and the last of the grape harvest was gathered ; and the last of the people's songs sung ; and the winds grew chill as they swept over bare fields, and the last of the passion-flowers faded and fell.

One day a nightingale lay dead at the foot of the palms ; a stray shot had stilled its song for ever.

A great hopelessness had fallen upon her.

All her life long she had been brave, sanguine, and ready to smile at the worst enmity of the world or fate ; but suddenly, as a finely strung bow may give way, she fell into utter lassitude and depression : a heavy despair seemed to weigh on her like a hand of ice.

He had left her with tenderness, passion, grief ; but he had left her.

To her it was like the fiat of their endless separation.

"Where did I fail?" she asked herself with a sort of remorse, as though the fault were hers ; and her great love would not let her recognize that its own very humility, and strength, and depth, had been its foes.

When Ioris had passed away over the mountains, he had gone looking back with dim eyes and aching heart indeed ; but he had gone saying to himself : "If she were never to behold my face again, she would never give herself to any other."

Had he not been so sure, so utterly sure, all the powers of earth would not have made him leave her, even for his honour's sake, or any other force or fate. But he knew that if he were to die that night, in body and in soul would she be widowed for ever, longing only for the kiss of death. Therefore he went secure.

Such security is the divinest part of love. But oftentimes—alas!—it does but melt passion, as the fulness of the sun melts snow into water.

She knew that he was well ; she knew that he was in Paris ; and she knew no more. She did not think that he was near the woman whom he had forsaken, because he had said that to think so was to dishonour him.

Yet a darkness like the terrible blank of death seemed to her to have come between them. All her life seemed to go away with him. A delirious pain kept her sleepless through the nights ; a deadly apathy kept her motionless and powerless through the days—

“Dead to use and name and fame”

now that the cruel charm was read. The dust gathered on the work she had begun, and the flies settled down on it undisturbed. She never looked at it but once, and then wondered wearily was it she who had ever had the power to create ? Was it she who once had thought life too short and earth too small for Art ? She looked back on her dead self as on some other woman, whom she watched curiously, and wondered at vaguely ; Art !—all the art of the world might have perished like a burnt scroll, and she would have cared nothing, had one life been beside hers.

Which is the truth, which is the madness ?—when the artist, in the sunlit ice of a cold dreamland, scorns love and adores but one art ; or when the artist, amidst the bruised roses of a garden of passion, finds all heaven on one human heart ?

Both are truth ; perhaps both are madness.

But it were well to die in one of them, without waking to know ourselves mad.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

At four o'clock in that golden October day, when at Rocaldi the shot nightingale lay dead underneath the palms, the Lady Joan Challoner sat in a chamber in the Rue de Rivoli. Her heavy black garments were deep with crape and all the outward signs of woe, and the notepaper before her had black edges of the broadest and the saddest; but on her face was a radiance of triumph beaming through the sun-bronze of travel; in her eyes was a shining smile of content. She was victorious.

The transfer was effected past recall.

And before her was seated Ioris.

The room was small, and close, and gaudy; a gilt clock ticked with feverish haste. The sun came in hot and glaring from the zinc roofs opposite the windows. Ioris, in the narrow, pent-up space and the stifling atmosphere, shuddered and felt stifled; he looked worn and very ill.

He had been betrayed and misled.

So he told himself, as ruined nations tell themselves so when, through their hesitation and their disorder, they are beaten in war.

He had been drawn on from one point to another by false hopes; he had reached too late to change or arrest what he disapproved of; his endeavours had all been fruitless and his wishes overborne; he had thought to save the interests of all those who had trusted him, and he found that he had only imperilled them. The mended pot was sent rocking down the stream, and his honour was embarked, a sad and trembling passenger, on that frail venture.

He had come northwards honestly believing that he came to retrieve the fortunes of a hapless enterprise, and he found that he had only fallen into the arms of a passionate and jealous woman. The inexorable pressure of circumstances had forced him whither he had sworn not to go; the inexorable nets of obligation had drawn him into the very peril he loathed; he had found himself face to face with her through business—only business, as she said to every one; and his doom, like that of the gold dropped in the sands and the sea of Sicily, was written.

"Io has come about the transfer," she said to her relatives and her society.

"Io has come to me in my grief," she said to her closer friends.

Her husband left for the baths of Taunus, though it was late in the year. The new association for Sicily sprang to light in the money market and on the thick, creamy paper of a brand-new prospectus. Ioris arrived too late to alter anything; he found that he could do nothing save sign what she wished him. Lady Joan shook out her crape, and felt that she could have ruled empires had she been called to them.

"You do look so ill, Io," she had cried to him fondly the first hour they met. "That is all fretting for *me*. I will never leave you again—never, never!"

He shuddered, and was silent.

She believed what she said, and she meant what she said. In her hard, rough, cruel way she loved him—as she saw love.

None can give what they have not in them.

They sat together now in the little, gilded, close room in the Paris hotel, and she was happy. He could not escape her, and the transfer as a fact accomplished was before her sight in its printed prospectus.

Paris was dull indeed, for it was out of the season, and in her heavy crape she could not go to amusements, laugh at theatres, or walk about at open-air concerts; but it was always Paris, and she could go and dine at the cafés and drive by moonlight in the Bois, and walk about and see the shops, and divert herself in many ways—even crape veils have their uses. And he was here, under her eye and hand, never to be let loose again until safe back in Fiordelisa.

Later on, that same night of his arrival, her jealous fears had assailed him.

"I hear you have been always with Etoile whilst I have been away," she had said suddenly, her eyes fastened on his.

But Ioris, being well conscious of all that would be said to him, was impenetrably masked.

"I have seen her sometimes, of course," he made answer.

"Is that all?"

"What more should there be?"

"I heard there was a great deal more—a great deal too much."

"Believe what you like! It is the same to me."

"You are cruel, Irene!"

"It is you who are suspicious and odious!"

"To be called that after all I have slaved to do for you, all I have suffered this cruel summer!"

"Why will you talk folly, then?"

"Is it folly?"

"Of course."

"You have not been with her?"

"Who can have told you I have!"

"Marjory told me."

"She is a mischief-maker ; she is envious."

"But Etoile is in love with *you* !"

"Do not say such things to me of any woman ; I do not like them."

"It is true."

"True or false, do not say it : it is unpleasant to me."

"Will you swear to me you do not care about her, then?"

"Why do you ask? Can you not be satisfied? Am I not here?"

She was satisfied ; and being blinded and muffled in a vast vanity that prevented her from seeing anything that was not worship of herself, she never noticed that all these answers were but evasions ; they were none of them such denials—firm, frank, and fierce—as the man will give who, being faithful, is suspected of infidelity.

But though merely evasions, his conscience smote him heavily for their usage. He thought he was blameless in deceiving his tyrant, but he knew himself guilty in denying one who adored him.

He seemed to see the deep scorn flash from the tranquil, studious eyes of Etoile—if she could know.

"It is only for a little while longer till all is clear——" he said to himself, as in the evening shadows of Fiordelisa he had said to himself, "It will be easier to write the truth."

So he stayed on in Paris and hated himself, and with every day that rose, said, "I will tell her, and go to Rome alone to-night." And every day passed with the truth still untold—the fatal, unnerving influence of a violent temper and a furious will had once more fallen on him, numbing all his strength.

And another and a worse thing began to come to him—he began to be ashamed to go back to Etoile, ashamed to say to her, "I have sinned and been faithless!"

He had made an effort to return alone ; had pleaded the end of the vintage, which needed the presence of its lord. But his tyrant had raised heaven and earth, and so moved all their forces, that the formalities of business had bound him as the threads of the Lilliputians the wrecked traveller ; and there were necessities for his presence in Paris weightier and more costly to break from than the necessities of the old classic custom of the grape harvest at home.

So he stayed, galled and fretted and half broken-hearted, knowing himself befooled, knowing himself a traitor, knowing himself unfaithful where his fairest faith lay, and sat in the gilded close room, with the zinc roof shining through the lace curtains of the window, and thought of cool palm shadows, of creamy daturas and blue passion-flowers, of a white form moving slowly through the sunlit grass.

Sometimes, when he could evade his tormentor's vigilance, and leave her engrossed with some *agent de change*, or some artist, or some mirthful writer of indecent comedies, or any other of her numerous acquaintances, he would go by himself and look at the old house by the trees of the Luxembourg, which was still Etoile's, and speak of her a little with the old people left in charge there.

They let him enter once, and he sat down in the great wooden *atelier* opening on the garden, and felt as if her presence were near him ; and when they uncovered a white bust that was of herself, and done by Clesinger, he turned from the sightless eyes of the marble as one ashamed.

It was a small house with a few great rooms. It had been decorated and arranged to her own tastes. It was full of suggestions and remembrances of her, to her lover, who now knew her every fancy and every feeling. Her very presence seemed close to him. In the library, with its bronze and oak shelves and many ancient and classic books ; in the great *salon*, with its few pieces of marble sculpture, its pictures, its arched alcove, with its fern and palms ; in the little dining-hall, with its old Oude-nard tapestry and old Rouen and ceramics—in it all a certain severity of taste that was allied with all her love of colour and grace seemed to speak to him of her.

"How unlike to all other women she is !" he thought, even as those rooms were unlike all the gilded and overloaded luxury of the day.

At other times he would go in the academies and private palaces where her works hung, and study their power, and their colour, and their classic grace, and feel his pulse beat more quickly as he thought, "The woman who can create those only lives for me ; the Muse that reigns here is but a fond and fragile thing to me, that trembles if she grieves me, that turns pale if I but frown !"

And the sense of her power was sweet to him, because it lay like a dog at his feet.

But the moments when he was free to wander or to remember them were rare to him, for his tyrant was niggard of his liberty and a miser over his very thoughts.

Ever and again she would wound him with the thorn of some gross word, some wanton lie, some echoed calumny that she flung carelessly but brutally at the name of Etoile as a low hand throws a handful of mud against a marble statue, pleased to see the pure whiteness of it stained. He felt almost as base as she who threw it, since he did not raise his voice to save the outrage.

"She would die for me !" he thought to himself, "and I, I have not the courage even to defend her from the senseless calumnies of jealous hate !"

And he kept a sullen silence that his tyrant translated as indifference, and, so translating, was content.

About any name brighter, any powers higher than those of the common mass of men and women, vile innuendoes, foul inventions, cowardly slanders always buzz and beat in the air as insects in the heat about the flower that bears most honey in its breast. These were in the air about the name of Etoile as about every other great gift of excelling; it was easy for another woman's jealousy to gather them together and make a poison-cloud of them, and point to it and say, "Look how heavy the cloud is; how the stinging things cluster; there must be corruption near!"

And he longed to strike her on the mouth for her lie, yet could not, she being a woman.

One night she had a comedian and an author to dinner with her in the Rue de Rivoli. They were persons whom she had known long; they were men of mediocre talent and of dubious reputation, but they were useful to her—had been useful, might again be useful—she invited them once whenever she passed through Paris.

The comedian had desired a part in that comedy in verse which had been one of the triumphs of Etoile. It had not been given him. The author had had a dramatic piece rejected at the great theatre where hers a little later had been so brilliantly received. Both were of that second rank in the world of literature and art which is the most bitter enemy to the leaders of that world that they possess; both had been passed over by Etoile with that indifference to their existence which was only carelessness in her, but which all took for pride.

Lady Joan launched her name on the sea of their cigar-smoke when their dinner was done.

They threw themselves on it as hounds on a deer.

They tore it, they worried it, they strangled it as the deer is torn, worried, and strangled; only out of the malice of mediocrity, but perhaps that is the most cruel malice that human life holds, because it is the most stupid.

Ioris sat and heard—in silence.

His tyrant watched him, but in vain. She caught no glance, she heard no word that she could construe. He might have been deaf.

When they rose to go, she bade him see them down the staircase of the hotel.

He rose and obeyed. He even ushered them to the courtyard, and through the courtyard into the street, with an impassable courtesy that flattered both very greatly.

When they were fairly in the street under the midnight skies, he struck each by turn on the lips with a glove that he had been twisting in his fingers.

"*Messieurs, vous êtes deux lâches !*" he said, very tranquilly, a sombre light shining in his eyes that startled them.

Then he turned on his heel and entered the hotel once more before either of them had recovered from his astonishment.

He felt the first contentment that he had known since he had left Rome.

He waited within the next morning, expecting some message from them, but he received none. The next day he learned that the comedian had been arrested for debt, and the author for an offence of the press against decency.

"You have choice friends, *ma chère !*" he said to the Lady Joan, who answered him sharply :

"They wrote me that you insulted them the other evening ; what did you do that for, pray ? They are most excellent creatures, though a little imprudent and unfortunate."

"They spoke too coarsely before you," said Ioris, carelessly. She smiled, well gratified.

"And you would have made a duel and a fuss about that, and compromised *me !* You must not do such things, Io ; it is dangerous."

Ioris laughed aloud.

She did not understand his laugh.

She began dimly to fancy that she did not understand him, weak as water, docile as the silk to the hand that winds it though she had always deemed him to be. Still she was content. "How fussy and foolish he is still about *me !*" she thought in her happy conceit. "The idea of being so angry, just for my sake, about nothing !"

And she was vain and proud.

Yet a certain sense of anxiety entered into her. She had always known him so docile and so patient to her command. If alone, unknown to her, he could rise in such anger (though for her sake), what might he do some day for his own ?

For she knew very well that she had misled him to his hurt ; that she had dragged him where it was hard to walk in clean paths ; that she had exposed him to bitter misconstructions and harsh obligations ; that one day he might resent and revolt—who could tell ?

But, after all, did it matter ? She had him close and fast. If she made his fortune, gratitude must bind him for ever to her ; if she had him ruined, necessity must keep him by her side. So she was content, and the days rolled on in Paris.

These days were ghastly to him ; he loathed every hour of them—from the long, dreary mornings filled with interviews and correspondence on a transaction that his intelligence mistrusted and his conscience condemned, to the long, gaslit evenings spent in a *tête-à-tête* dinner in a café, a saunter through

the crowded streets, a drive by the lake, a supper at a restaurant—all the old, worn-out routine that seemed to him now so coarse, so common, so gross, so hateful.

Every moment that passed by seemed to make him tenfold a traitor; every night, looking up at the stars shining over the sea of gaslights in the Champs Elysées, he thought of a woman in his own land whom the moonlight was finding out in her solitary chamber kneeling by her bed to pray for him, or lying sleepless with wet eyes for his sake. "She loves me so much, she will forgive even this," he said to himself; and yet felt so base in his own sight for his faithlessness, that it seemed to him he could never look her straightly in the eyes again.

To his tyrant he did not think that he had sinned, but to Etoile he knew that he had.

"She loves me so much!" he thought; and then his hand would loosen itself from his companion's clasp, and he would move impatiently and thrust her away with a restless fretfulness.

"You are very changed," she said to him once.

He answered her sullenly:

"You have acted without me: you have imperilled my name; you have loaded me with fresh obligations. Can you expect me to be grateful? Do not make me scenes, for heaven's sake!"

And she was stilled and vaguely alarmed, for she knew in her own secret heart that she had brought ruin and him very near one to another.

True, the mended pot was swimming gaily down the stream amongst the bronze ones, but who could tell how long it would be afloat? She had done a clever thing, and she had put money in her purse, and she was rejoicing in her strength; still, like a cold wind, there came over her the consciousness that some day Ioris might rise in fury and reproach her as his ruin.

The chill passed quickly off, the momentary spasm was soon still; she was not a woman to mistrust herself or feel the heart-ache of a self-reproach. If matters turned out well, it was she who had made him do so; if ill, why, then, other people had been fools. And that was all. So she sat in the little, hot, gilded room and read her letters, and was fiercely glad and fiercely proud because she had woven her threads so patiently and well that here Ioris was beneath the autumn sun, here by her side in Paris.

For a time there was no sound but the ticking of the gilt clock, and the scratching of her steel pen. Ioris was stretched upon a couch; his eyes were closed, his face was colourless and very weary. He was thinking—would it be possible by any plea to escape alone and go to Rome that night?

Her writing finished at length, the Lady Joan lifted her head and looked at him. She could not but see that he looked very ill and very fatigued, but it gratified her to see him so because she took it as witness for his grief at her long absence from him.

"Poor Io, how silly he is!" she said softly to herself, the self-satisfied, vain smile of complete complacency breaking over her face and softening its harsher lines; and she rose and leaned a little over him, and brushed a fly from off his low, broad brow.

Ioris, startled, lifted himself with a sudden, quick movement from the cushions of the couch. As he did so a letter fell from between his shirt and waistcoat. He caught it rapidly, but not so rapidly but what she had seen its superscription.

"That is the writing of Etoile!" she cried, and snatched his wrist and held his hand motionless.

"It is her writing," she said between her teeth. "Give it me—do you hear me?—give it me!"

But he was more agile than she.

He twisted his wrist out of her grasp, and with a rapid action tossed the letter on to the fire glowing in the open stove.

It flamed in a moment; in another moment it was but a few grey ashes on the wood.

"You have secrets from me! She writes to you! You dare to deceive me!"

The words hissed through the air about his head like a volley of arrows; she screamed, she raved, she poured abuse and upbraiding from her lips in torrents of flame.

"You have secrets from me!" she cried once more in her fury. "That woman loves you, writes to you—you carry her letters in your breast—and I—— Oh, you traitor—you faithless coward!"

His face grew dark, and he looked at her one moment with a cold, pale rage, with an impulse that, followed, would have given him back his manhood and his peace.

"If I be faithless and a coward, I am the thing you make me"—the answer sprang to his lips, and with it all the truth.

But once again was chance against him.

The door of their sitting-room opened; there entered one of her fellow-financiers fresh from the Bourse, where the shares of the new company were being liberally favoured and purchased.

She choked the wrath into silence, as only finance could have had power to make her do; and, with lowering brows and eyes of flame, forced a smile for the bringer of good tidings. The financier was a Jew of Galicia; he was voluble and vivacious; he had much to say, and was eager to say it; he

was inquisitive, and not delicate; he stayed a long time, though he saw that the air he sat in was charged with a storm, and he was too important and too necessary to be lightly dismissed or dealt with harshly.

The face of Ioris had grown expressionless and unrevealing; he had had time to stifle his impulse to assume his mask. At his heart a sudden rage was eating, but he smothered it, and resumed a glacial graceful calm.

When the door closed on their visitor, she flashed her glittering eyes of steel upon him.

“*Now* answer me, if you can—if you dare——”

“I have no secrets of my own from you,” he answered her chillily. “But you must allow me to keep the secrets of others. I could not do less than burn the letter of any woman rather than have it read by any other—even by you.”

She looked at him savagely, questioningly; his eyes met hers with a cold, impenetrable serenity in their dark depths.

He had made up his mind to baffle her at any cost. He succeeded.

“The secrets of others!” she echoed. “You mean that she has a passion for you, and that you care nothing for her—is that what you mean? Is that why you burnt her letter?”

Ioris was silent.

Silence gives consent.

“You might have shown it to me,” she muttered. “You ought to have shown it to me whatever it was. To burn it——”

“The woman I love is the last that I could show it to, surely,” said Ioris, with his cold smile unchanged, and his eyes impenetrable. He could have laughed aloud at the ironical equivocal, even whilst every drop of blood in him burned with a sullen anger. But to her vanity and self-delusion the answer was a triumph and a joy.

“Then you admit she loves you?” she cried aloud.

“That is what I never admit of any woman, to either woman or man.”

His voice had a soft, icy chill in it; his eyes had their changeless impenetrability.

She screamed, and clapped both hands above her head.

“As if you didn’t admit it by that very answer to me! Oh you chivalrous ass, Io!—to give yourself all these grand airs, and almost make *us* quarrel. What nonsense; what stuff! I always saw she was scheming to entangle you. I always saw she was wild about you——”

“Hush, hush! Is a ruined man such fine prey?”

“Ruined! you have Fiordelisa, and you are going to make your fortune through *me*. Besides, are you not always Prince

Ioris? I tell you I always saw her designs—yes, the very first night she came to us. With all her wonderful talent she could not hide it from me. And to write to you, unasked! How unwomanly; how disgraceful! You were far too considerate and too clement in burning her letter. What do such women deserve? But how does she know you are here?”

A sudden awakening suspicion flashed freshly across her, and interrupted the flood of her just indignation and of her chaste disgust.

Ioris stood, still, opposite to her, with his back to the light; a more observant woman would have seen the strain in his calm, the rigidity in his expression, the enforced indifference and restraint; but she observed none of them. She was not observant; she was only suspicious.

“How could she know you were in Paris?” she said again. He answered coldly—

“No doubt it is known in Rome. My servants——”

“Oh, if she is low enough to go to your servants!” cried his tyrant, “I dare say she is; well, if she ask, she will know you are with *me*” (she did not note the spasm that passed over the rigidity of his features). “She will know you are with me. How dare she write; how dare she——?”

“*Chère*,” said Ioris, with a smile, whose bitterness escaped her. “*Chère*, you forget; our friendship, sweet as it is and sacred to me, is not a bond that the world respects very much; she may not understand its sanctity. That is possible.”

“Then she should be made to understand,” said Lady Joan, curtly.

Ioris was silent.

“The forward wretch, to dare to write,” muttered his companion, glancing longingly at the grey ashes in the stove; she felt that she would never wholly pardon him for burning that letter so, before her very eyes.

“Let us go out for our drive,” she said less fiercely, “and as we go, I will tell you all I heard of her from my dear father, before he left us for that fatal cruise. We will dine up at Madrid; the nights are so fine; and there is a full moon still. Nobody will recognise me with my veil on, will they?”

The hours that followed were sickly as hours of fever to Ioris.

The dusty roads; the seared and reddening trees; the passage by the lake, so different to what he had known it when the Second Empire had been in its gilded glory; the dinner at Madrid; the cigars on the wooden balcony; the garden where the gaudy dahlias were dying; the creepers that were faded and seared; they were all loathsome to him. He hated the flare of the lights; he hated the smell of the smoke; most of all he hated himself.

"I am faithless; faithless!" he said to his conscience; and his conscience echoed—faithless.

It seemed to him that the moon-rays slanting in through the balcony windows seeing him would find their way to the dreamer in Rome, and say to her, "Dream no more; he is faithless to you."

It was for this that he had left her! this exhausted mockery of love; this shame and satire of passion; this gross, grotesque, unlovely union of violence, of voluptuousness, of mercenary greed and guile! The white rays of the moon seemed to pierce him like Ithuriel's spear.

They saw him here.

They saw Etoile where she slept in Rome.

He was disgusted with himself.

He felt himself scarcely higher or nobler than the men whom he had struck on the mouth with his glove.

He had surrendered her to the violence and coarseness of a jealous woman.

He had let a base and unreturned passion be imputed to her and had held his peace.

He had let a lie like a serpent wind round and enfold her, and had not lifted his hand to pluck it off; nor lifted his heel to stamp its poisonous, flat, hissing head lifeless for ever.

And in vain he said to his conscience: "It is only for a little while; a few days more——"

In vain; for he knew that he should have strangled the lie at its birth; that he should have risen and said manfully to his tyrant:

"I am yours no more; I am hers for ever."

CHAPTER XL.

It was a cheerless day in the late autumn, and Rome was drenched with chilly dusky rains, dark and dreary and depressing, swept with high winds, and overhung with mist and cloud.

It was six o'clock in the grim old palace where the Scrope-Stairs dwelt by the Forum Trajani; it was the first day of the rites of the tea-urn and the gathering of the incoming spinsters and dowagers in that holy quarter. All the matrons and virgins of the Inviolable Isle and of the Free Republic had not yet arrived in Rome, but many had done so; many had come thither that dark, dreary afternoon to partake of the bohea that was purification, and the muffin that was a voucher.

The religious rites were over; only two or three of the familiars of the place were lingering: they were Mr. Silverly Bell and Mrs. Macscrip, and the maiden lady who had written so learnedly on the Penalties and the Privileges of Vestals.

They still stood round the fire, conversing.

"Is she still here?" said Mrs. Macscrip.

"Still here," said Mr. Silverly Bell.

"Taken that beautiful place that is called Rocaldi?"

"Yes, and the rooms by the Rospigliosi also. It must cost a great deal to live as she does."

"How does she do it? How can she do it?"

"Ah, how indeed? No capital, you know. Makes money certainly; makes money—but what is that?"

"Why doesn't she go back to Paris? She has a house there they say, and one would think all her interests——"

"Ah!" Mr. Silverly Bell smiled first, and then sighed very deeply.

"Artists are all alike!" added Mr. Silverly Bell, with a tender regret over the sad shortcomings of genius.

"I hope we shall never meet her any more in society," said the author of the "Privileges and Penalties," and she shuddered between each word.

"Not likely," said Mr. Silverly Bell, with another sigh, and took a letter out of his pocket.

"Here is a little portion I can read to you without any violation of confidence, and written me a few weeks ago by our dear absent friend; what her poor father said to her before he went on that fatal cruise to Scotland; he could never express himself with sufficient indignation at its ever having been

imagined as possible that he could have presented her to Lady Joan. It is all very sad."

And he read the extract from the letter in a low mellow voice, with a touching melancholy accent.

"My poor father told me a few days before he left for that fatal cruise that he never had known her at all, except just as men do know women of no character; going in and out of studios and seeing her in the crowd, when the Salon opened. He could not be furious enough at its ever having been dreamt that he could have sent her to *me*! You may contradict it everywhere. My father always thought the worst of her. I believe her very pictures are not her own."

"Is it not sad?" said the reader again, as he finished this communication.

"Poor dear Lady Joan!" said Mrs. Macscrip. "Infamous indeed! To abuse her hospitality in such a manner! But she is so sweetly confiding."

"Yes, so fatally frank herself, you see. She never has a suspicion of evil."

"A beautiful character!"

"Most noble, yes. But sure to be abused."

"Sure to be," echoed Mr. Silverly Bell, "and its kindness traded on. She should have thought, inquired, been more cautious, before receiving a person merely recommended to her by so notoriously bad a man as the Baron Voightel; a great man indeed, as we all know, but an excessively unscrupulous one. A man may discover a continent, and yet be unfit for all the decencies of ordinary life."

All the ladies sighed with him, and old Lady George, straining her deaf ear to hear as she knitted, muttered over her lambswool—

"Bad? a cannibal! I have heard him confess that he ate human flesh, and preferred it to butcher's meat. He told me so."

"If that were all!" said Mr. Silverly Bell, gently, "One might conceive the horrible agonies of hunger in shipwreck driving a man even to such frightful extremity as that. But in cold blood, in everyday life, to introduce a notorious adventuress to a noble and blameless lady——"

"Can you call a great artist an adventuress?" said sleepy Lord George, with a gleam of humour shining in his watery dim eyes.

"It is an expression," said Mr. Silverly Bell hastily. "A common expression. A usual expression. When one knows nothing of a person, of whence they came, of how they exist——"

"Etoile banks at Hottinguer's. I wish I did," said Lord

George, with a little sad mirth in the twinkle of his eyes. "If she have taken a fancy to Ioris I think he is very much to be envied; I wish I were he; what does he go away for? He is a silly fellow if he don't know his good fortune."

"Good fortune!" echoed Mr. Silverly Bell, in horror. "My dear sir, excuse me, are you mad? What worse could happen to our charming, but too vacillating, friend, than to fall into the power of an unscrupulous woman of genius who——"

"You think an unscrupulous woman without genius better? Well to be sure, he has got that now," muttered Lord George, fumbling for his snuff-box. But his daughters stifled the atrocious words in their screams.

"Papa, how can you! How dare you! Of course you only say it for fun, but still——"

Lord George shuffled off into an inner room out of the storm; Mr. Silverly Bell resumed—

"Who, because she only understands the baseness of lawless passions herself, is utterly incapable of comprehending the purity of a simple friendship, such as a woman that is all *mind* takes delight in; a woman that is all *mind* never thinks of the misconceptions that her innocence and noble actions may be open to; Lady Joan is all *Mind*. She has done the most wonderful things in London and Paris; entirely saved the whole Messina affair from ruin by her energy and promptitude; it is impossible to say what the shareholders do not owe to her; and then, just because a mere friend, who is a director of the affair, has naturally to go over to Paris to negotiate a loan with Erlanger or Rothschilds (I think it is Rothschilds), foul-mouthed people pretend that he is gone over for *her*; that he is her lover; that—oh, it is disgusting, quite disgusting!" said Mr. Silverly Bell, breaking off with eloquent abruptness as his feelings grew too strong for his habitual suavity.

Prim and proper little Mrs. Macscrip stroked his arm consolingly. "Dear Mr. Bell, do you suppose *anybody* worth thinking *twice* about ever dreams of anything *wrong* with dear frank Lady Joan and dear good Mr. Challoner? Impossible—quite impossible!"

"If all the world were as excellent as Mrs. Macscrip it would be impossible," said Mr. Silverly Bell gallantly. "It should be impossible, even foul-mouthed as the world is," he said more bitterly. "But she is all *mind*, and she forgets that a base tongue always attributes a base motive. She was utterly amazed to see Ioris in Paris. She tells me so. He went over quite unexpectedly on a telegram from Erlanger or Rothschild, I think it was Rothschild; and of course he went to see her—what more natural, with such business interests as theirs are in common. But a mere simple thing like that is enough for calumny!"

And tears suffused the gentle pale eyes of Mr. Silverly Bell.

At that moment in from a bed-chamber adjoining came the youngest daughter; she was excited and eager, even more than her wont, and her thin features were quivering with agitation.

"A telegram from dearest Joan," she said breathless with emotion, "from Perugia. She arrives to-night, in an hour's time. We are all to meet her."

"Delighted," murmured Mr. Silverly Bell, a little envious. "I will go also. Seven o'clock—the train from Mont Cenis, I think? Is it Mont Cenis? Did you know she was coming so soon? She wrote me next week."

"She meant to have waited till next week. She does not say what has hastened her. She only says—'Meet me, seven to-night.' Dearest Joan!"

"You must go and get ready, dears; I might take you in my landau," said Mrs. Macscrip, who was always good-natured to quite proper people.

"Oh, no, that would detain you too long and we are too many, thanks so much," said Marjory fluently. "Mr. Bell will get us a cab; Mr. Bell will escort us. Dear Joan! You can understand my delight, I am sure. We have not seen her since May! An eternity! Dear Joan!—and after such grief as she has had too!"

Then the guests took their leave, and Mr. Silverly Bell poured himself out a weak cup of tea and talked to Lady George about her knitting, and the Scrope-Stairs daughters went and robed themselves in waterproofs and thick veils, and went out into the misty rain and howling winds with their escort. And the heart of one of them beat high.

"I hope she is not all alone, you know," she said to their escort. "I do hope she is not all alone; I should think Ioris is sure to have come with her."

"Oh, I should think so," answered Mr. Silverly Bell. "Challoner being still away in Germany, they would not let her travel alone with her maid—naturally he will have returned with her; most naturally."

For Mr. Silverly Bell, in his way as a friend, was quite priceless—unless he quarrelled with you; until he quarrelled with you he would see you through anything, with his smile and his sigh at your service.

Marjory never felt the streaming rain, the piercing winds.

In her own small way she was triumphant, vicariously she was victorious; for she was sure that Ioris was returning, or else never would her friend be coming over the mountains.

He would not be hers indeed, but she felt that to see him in the old, worn fetters tread the old, dull paths would be almost

happiness compared with the agony of the summer, which had seen him pass to new joys, where the passion-flowers embraced the palms. The woman who, unloved herself, loves a prisoner, can bear her fate whilst daily she can see him behind his bars pacing to and fro his joyless cell; but when release comes, and the ship of good tidings bears him free over the sea to fresh joys under fairer skies—then, then indeed she knows bitterness, unless she be a very noble woman, and Marjory Scrope was not noble. She had betrayed the captive's flight; she had locked the chains anew about his feet, that so at least she might keep him in her sight and still the hunger of her aching heart. She was a merciless, jealous, envious soul, but being a maiden of good name and of good society, she did not let these cruel passions rise to the surface to be seen of men; instead, she cloaked herself in waterproof and friendship, and hastened through the foggy night to meet her dearest Joan.

The train was late; the night was very cold and rainy. Mr. Silverly Bell, despite the warmth of his rejoicing, shivered as he paced the stone floor of the waiting hall; but Marjory was burning hotly with the fever of hope and the joy of success. She strained her ear, she strained her eyes; her heart beat quickly, her pale, waxen features flushed.

"I do so long to see her, darling Joan!" she said, with breathless lips. The bells clanged, the doors were thrown open, the throng of travellers poured out in the gaslight and mist, in the gloom and the rain. Foremost among the crowd, she saw grey eyes like steel, a flash of white teeth, a sunbrowned face with a crape veil tossed from above it. As she threw her arms about the advancing form, and welcomed her, her eager glance saw another face in the shadow farther back—a face pale, cold, very weary; the face of a proud man, unwilling and ashamed.

Then Marjory said in her heart her psalm of praise.

The fetters were fresh locked.

"Are you all here, dears?—and darling St. Paul too?" cried Lady Joan. "How good of you, such an awful evening as it is! Ah, yes, my grief—such grief indeed! Io, have you got my jewel-case safe? The tickets?—oh, Io has them."

So she returned in triumph.

Who would ask her what she had done in Paris? Who would mind how she had returned, or with whom? Who would dare to comment on her travels, since she had the wit to be met at the station by these irreproachable maidens and their venerable and venerated escort?

Other women might find such a journey from Paris land them in endless troubles and obloquy, but she knew how to make such adventures innocent as milk and harmless as a dove,

only by sending a telegram—one telegram that had cost her a franc!

Society is often bought cheaply, but not often so cheaply as that.

"*Tue-la!*" cries a famous writer, preaching the old, natural, just crusade of man against the faithless wife.

"*Tue-la!*"—his Guenon de Noé grins, from one of her small ears to the other, at the absurd, antiquated notion as she troops, with hundreds like her, through society, applauded, welcomed, well content, smiling complacently in the face of a world that smiles complacently at her.

"*Tue-la!*"—why, she laughs aloud. Who should kill her? Her husband? Behold him as he comes meekly in her wake, joking good-humouredly with the person by whom, in barbarous ages, he might have imagined himself injured! Society? She caresses Society, and Society kisses her in return on both cheeks. The Ape of Noah might be the Dove of Noah for the olive branches that she offers and sees accepted.

"Kill her!"—the law has been re-written.

Far away is the day when, in old Judæa, they led such women as she out under the meridian sun, and bared them naked, and stoned them to death in the sight of the people, so that their name should be a byword and a reproach through all the land.

The law has been re-written.

The Ape of Noah may smile against the sun; she may sit in the seat of honour; men shall praise and women salute her with a kiss; for her there is no need of night and darkness; she may take her pleasure in peace and pride, and no voice shall arraign her; and at the banquets of her world, the one whom it pleases her to choose from others shall be summoned beside her in tender forethought of her fond desire.

"Kill her!" The re-written law says to her—

"You shall enjoy the sum and substance of all vice; you shall draw your lover within your chamber whilst your child sleeps against the chamber wall; you shall be guilty, and your world shall know your guilt; yet if your lord be only as base as you, all things shall go well with you—you shall say your empty shibboleth of 'friendship,' and the world will let you say it and receive you."

True, if you were not guilty, but only took pleasure in counterfeiting a guilt you had not, you would be a still poorer and more contemptible thing even than you are now; true, if it were as you say, and you were innocent, you would be the very fool of fools to play thus upon the housetops the antics of a sin you have not; true, turn you which way you will, you must be either the silliest or the basest of all women.

But you are many in number, and you agree to stuff your shibboleth down the yawning throat of your world, and you are strong by reason that you have so many sisters; and so you turn the face of the world to you and set it smiling, as he who keeps the key of a clock sets the hands of the clock to noonday. The day of passion is gone, with the old heroical ages; the day of devotion has fled away to the dreamland of poets; the day even of sin that was honest has passed as a foe too frank.

Your day has dawned, and is at its meridian—the day of lust that folds its arm within prudence, of pale love that is hid in the warm cloak of convenience.

When the day of truth comes where will you be?

In your grave, with marble Virtues weeping over your name in letters of gold. For the law has been re-written.

CHAPTER XLI.

It was night, and Etoile sat alone.

The lamps had been lighted, and shed a mellow glow over the great room, the pale busts and white marbles, the dusky outlines of powerful sketches in charecoals, the green drooping fronds of palms and ferns, the faint soft hues of old frescoes and older arazzi.

The unfinished picture of the Sordello stood on a great oak easel untouched since the day that Ioris had left her; only one thing was perfected in it, and that was the face of the poet; the face there was that of Ioris.

She sat alone, doing nothing. For the first time in all her life her hours were empty: came without welcome, departed without use. These full rich studious days which, before she had known him, had always seemed too short, and never had one vacant moment that was not sweet through labour or through dreams, how far away they seemed! They were as dead as the dead birds that she had buried in her childhood under the green leaves in green Ardennes.

"Oh, my love, my love; what you have cost me!" she thought, with the scalding tears rushing to her eyes; yet even though he had cost her a hundredfold more bitter pangs she would not but have had his life cross hers: she never for one instant wished that they had never met.

To have been happy once : it is so much. Well is he who made us so, pardoned all after cruelty or pain.

The winds roared angrily without through the yellowed passion vines whose flowers were dead. The rains beat on the long grass, and the leafless boughs against the wooden shutters.

There was an ebon crucifix in the dusk beyond the lamp-light; above it hung the first portrait she had ever made of him; she kneeled there and wept bitterly, and prayed for him.

The door unclosed gently.

He came into the shadow, and thence into the light. He was pallid as death, weary, worn, ashamed. She looked up and saw him through the mist of her tears; with a cry of unutterable joy she sprang to him.

In a little while he loosened his arms from about her and sank down at her feet.

"You are the good angel of my soul! What can I say to you? Will you forgive?—"

She leaned her hands upon his shoulder as he kneeled there, and thrust him backward, gazing on his face; she felt as if a knife had pierced her heart.

"You have been——with her?"

The words were so low they seemed to stifle her as she spoke them.

His face drooped till it was hidden on her knees. She knew then that he had sinned against her. He knew then that to have been faithless to her was the darkest infidelity of all his life.

CHAPTER XLII.

THERE was a long silence, broken only by the sound of the falling rain in the darkness without. His arms were still about her, his face still buried on her knees.

"Can you forgive?" he muttered at length. "Dear, I said the truth. I never meant to go to her. I was deceived, misled, drawn on to where I loathed to be. When I left you I never foresaw what she would do. I have sinned against you, but never with my heart."

She put his arms away from her, and lifted her head with a sense of suffocated pain.

"You have been with her," she echoed once again. She felt as if her own lips were polluted, as if her own life were full of unutterable shame, and scorn, and outrage.

A man cannot perhaps know all that a woman suffers from his infidelity. Hers to him may wring his pride and his passions with a great agony, but it cannot seem all at once to bring intense humiliation, intense desecration, personal and spiritual, with it as does his to her. It cannot make him ashamed to exist, as it makes her. Moreover, he has his vengeance: she is helpless.

"You have been with her!" she repeated: and had the knife been truly in her breast, it would have hurt her less than this.

"I have confessed it," he muttered wearily. "Men are weak and vile; we are not worth a thought. All the while I have hated myself, and yet—— My angel, look at me! Do not look like that! You frighten me, Etoile!"

"Your angel! And you could——!"

A burning flush overspread her face; then she grew deathly pale; she strove with trembling hands to put his hands away from her; she could not endure that he should touch her; a dull confused murmur seemed surging in her ears; she felt faint and blind.

Then all at once the bands of pain at her heart seemed to loosen; a great sob rose in her throat; she shrank away from him and wept bitterly.

Ioris gathered her weeping thus in his arms, and kissed her on her closed eyelids.

"She will forgive now," he thought. "If she would not forgive me, she would not weep. Women that are vain and are hard, do not grieve—they avenge."

And his sin seemed slight to him, because it was pardoned.

"Are the passion-flowers dead, dear?" he said caressingly. "Well, they will bloom another summer, and they will find your love and mine lovelier than ever, will they not? My treasure, why will you weep so? I am here with you once more. And you forgive me—ah, yes, you forgive me, you are one of the women that forgive. You would kiss my hand if it stabbed you!"

CHAPTER XLIII.

MEANWHILE in the Turkish room Lady Joan was smoking. All the racket of hasty arrival, all the disorder of long travel, were about her, but she was happy. She had come back successful. Who can want more than success? Tongues were going gaily around her; Mimo sat on the sofa beside her, and Guido Serravalle on a stool at her feet; Marjory Scrope was making her tea, and Mr. Silverly Bell was arranging her lamps.

"Io's gone to his own house with a headache," she said to her companions; but it did not disturb her; the transfer was made and he was safe back in Rome. He had always a headache after a journey, and it certainly was very cold coming over the mountains.

She herself had no headache, nor any ills at all. She never had, unless it were desirable at any moment to appear an invalid; she was bronzed, bright-eyed, animated, amicable, even gay beyond her wont, till she remembered she was in mourning. She was glad to be home again; glad to have managed so well; glad to have brought her captive in her train; glad to shine in the lamplight before the eyes of her adorers as a very Semiramis of Finance.

Ioris was absent indeed; he was sullen, cold, unwell, but that was not of very much consequence; she had had him with her in Paris; she had brought him with her to Rome; that was all that really mattered: she was even glad he was away; she had so many teacups and triptychs to account for with Mimo, and tuncful Guido was a sillier young goose than ever as he sat at her feet.

"You were quite wrong about all that," she took a moment to whisper to her watch-dog. "Oh, yes, you were, dear, quite wrong; he cannot endure Etoile, she persecutes him; actually wrote to him in Paris; would you believe it?"

The pallid skin of Marjory Scrope flushed painfully.

"Are you sure he does not care?" she said, nervously.

"Sure? Do you think anybody can ever deceive me?"

"But indeed——," began her poor watch-dog.

"He cannot endure her," said Lady Joan, clinching the matter. "He tore her letter into shreds before me—he was so disgusted. Io has no secrets from me, you know—no more than he would have had from a sister."

Marjory kissed her with effusion.

"So glad to have you home, darling!" she murmured; for indeed she felt that here was a gaoler from whom no escape would be possible for the prisoner, whom she herself could only see if he remained behind the bars of his prison-house. She was certain that her lynx-eyed friend was blinded; she could not herself forget those summer evenings when the shadow of Ioris had passed under the palms, and she had seen him so pass, watching under the cistus shrub of the open plains. She could not forget, and she was not deceived. But she forbore to press her convictions home. What her friend chose to ignore, she would ignore also; what she chose to impute, she would impute likewise. She had supreme faith in her friend's power to hold and keep: faith so great that she kissed her in all sincerity.

The gaoler was so much better than the barque of good tidings that would bear him away to fair and free countries!

Marjory, going home in the blowing winds and rains, at night, felt a dull yet fierce pleasure stir at her heart. She was quick to catch a clue, she was swift to follow a hint, and she was cruel as unloved and unlovely women often are.

This woman whom she hated, this Muse whom she envied, this cold and careless celebrity who could sit amidst her flowers doing nothing, this stranger whom Ioris loved, was to be called the fool of a hopeless passion!—the vengeance was sweet to this lone maiden whose own hopeless passion had been the mockery of her little world. She did not know how the lie was to be fastened, how the story was to be told; but she had firm faith in her friend and in her powers of falsehood.

"Joan will separate them," she said to her own sick heart with a cruel joy, going home in the beating rain. She herself could only wait, as echo waits till it is summoned.

For the few next succeeding days Lady Joan was in a whirl of business and contentment. There was a multitude of things to see after and arrange—all the threads to be taken up that bound the Temple of On, the venture to Mimo's shop and Trillo's studio; Mrs. Grundy and Mrs. Candour to be called on and propitiated lest they should see anything odd in that Paris sojourn and homeward journey; all the winter's campaign through Society to be thought over and mapped out; and, beyond all, the

newly-painted pot to be set on high, with its glittering charms gleaming on its glaze.

The pot would not long hold water—no mended pot ever does; but it looked very well, and made a beautiful effect, and that was all that was wanted. On the whole, on these first days of her return she was more than even satisfied; she was brilliantly triumphant.

True, although the affairs of the bridge were going on again, and the crabs and the barnacles were having more planks driven into their native waters to become their home in due time; true, the Società Inglese Italiana—be it under whatever name it might be—was much like that famous knight of woeful story who, whether he ran in doublet of blue, or red, or green, ran always equally ill and tilted direfully. But the brass plate on the modern door in the old palace down in Trastevere had its inscription altered from that of the Ponte Calabrese-Siciliano to that of the Promotrice delle Comunicazioni Meridionale, and the prospectus read quite differently, and Tunis came into it, and much was made of the mails from Malta; and altogether it was quite a new thing—to look at—if underneath it remained very much the same as a lady's face does under the kolk and the paint and the pearl powder. Mr. Challoner was to keep his crook and sit at his handsome desk when he liked; the old shareholders were to get nothing indeed, but the new ones were to get everything—make their fortunes, in point of fact; and as any old shareholder could become a new one if he liked to buy new shares, what, in heaven's name, had he to complain about? His money was gone down in the sand amongst the crabs and the barnacles, and the winds and the waters alone were responsible for that misfortune. If the old shareholder would not buy a dredger to get it up again in the shape of fresh shares, it was clearly his own fault if it remained at the bottom, or if the more enterprising new shareholder dredged for it.

So at least Lady Joan said, and she knew all about these things, and had dwelt in the Land of Goschen, where money is always going down in the sand.

Ioris was bitterly dissatisfied and disquieted indeed, and the Duke of Oban had withdrawn himself in a fury and fume, and nasty people said that the old shareholders would have still demanded an inquiry in public tribunals only that they were loath, as timid human beings are, to throw good money after bad. But Ioris never understood anything (at least, so she said), and old Oban was a muff and an idiot; and the old shareholders might bluster till they were hoarse—it was all their own faults if they would stand still and scream, instead of coming dredging again as they might do. So she settled everything to her own complete satisfaction; and when she was satisfied herself, she

was not over much given to heeding the dissatisfaction of others.

The new dredgers would go on dredging for a few years, and the engineers would go on driving new piles in to please the crabs, and Tunis would always be on the horizon and Malta on the sea; and if the new shareholders could not make the bridge stand, or the mails come and go by it, it would be their own fault—in the future! Nobody would be responsible except the sea. When the tides are against you, you can always come into court with a clear conscience and quote Canute (Knut, as we are told we ought to write it). She was always quoting Canute now, and could always do so equally hereafter.

“No speculation is infallible,” she would say. “No one can be perfectly sure that they have Providence and all his ins-and-outs on their side. One can only do one’s best to succeed.”

After all, it does not very much matter whether you succeed or not when you are only that blessing of Providence—a promoter.

Besides, Lady Joan was beginning to think that a little touch of ruin might not be altogether disadvantageous. Not such ruin as will end in bailiffs and no dinner to eat; not real ruin such as some of those silly shareholders were screaming about as their fate; but a little touch of poetical ruin, or rather retrenchment. It would look well, as if one had sacrificed a good deal in driving the piles in the sand, so she meditated, as if one also had been a victim to the tides and the winds; besides, if one had to retrench, one might have to live altogether at Fiordelisa—why not? The great old house was full of sun and had carpets. On the whole, she was not sure, if necessary, that she would not be ruined a little. She was a clever woman, and could draw usefulness out of everything, as Southern farmers get good olives out of old rags.

So that she was in high spirits in this rough rainy weather that followed her return to Rome. Her husband had not yet come over the mountains; her slaves and courtiers were all at hand about her; her mourning was useful, for it evoked so much sympathy, and some people out of sympathy called on her that had not called before; night and day she was busied with the new shares and the new agencies and the new enterprise: she was in paradise. Ioris held himself aloof indeed; Ioris seemed dull and cold and grave, said he was unwell, left her to herself very much, but what of that? He had chosen to sulk about the transfer—let him! He could not alter the fact of it; and he would recover his temper in time, so she said. Meanwhile there was Douglas Græme fresh from chamois hunting, and Guido Serravalle eager to sing the same songs, and Mimo and Trillo, those Tyndarids of art, both ready to run about with her into society, east and west; Lady Joan was happy.

Was she going to make herself miserable because Ioris sulked in a corner and accused her of having jeopardised his honour? —not she! He might frown as he liked; she had got the transfer, and she had got Fiordelisa.

She put her hands in her coat pockets and a cigar in her mouth, and drove over to Fiordelisa, with Mr. Silverly Bell and young Guido Serravalle and his lute by her side.

"I have saved the place for Ioris," she said to every one; it was a title the more to it.

"Did the Prince come here with anybody whilst I was away?" she asked of the peasants, as she visited the pigs.

They told her that he had come seldom, and been always alone.

"Then of course there never was anything between him and Etoile," she thought with great content. "He would have brought her here first, of all places, at once if there had been."

For such follies as delicate instinct and lofty passions never occurred to her. She was clever, but she made a common error of some clever people; she judged others by herself. This kind of error, however, conduces to content, and Lady Joan was content, and, as she rambled about, thought that next year she would really have that frost-bite of ruin, and winter here.

Imperator would never get an hour of liberty then, nor his master.

"To think *I* have saved the dear old place! It is so delightful!" she said again and again to her companions, and said it so often that she ended in believing it herself.

"She has saved his estate for him!" cried her friends after her in chorus with strophe and antistrophe of praise, marvel, and applause.

It was a fine day, though cold, this first day that she had visited Fiordelisa. The snow was on the mountains, and she wished that it might be thick enough to block up Mr. Challoner in Germany, but in the green plains the sea wind was blowing not unkindly, and the yellow colchicum cups were glancing amongst the grasses. She spent a short day, but a bright day, rejoicing to seize her sceptre and her scales, to set her foot down heavily on the innocent little freedoms that aged servants had taken in her absence, to see the household all hurry and skurry like trembling schoolboys, the dog cower, and the steward turn red over his books, to feel her power all over the old house and the old lands and the old people.

She had a happy day, though a brief one, and drove back to Rome as the sun set, feeling that truly for a wise woman all joys of this world are possible.

"Is that adventuress woman here still?" she said to her

companions, as they drove across the burning amber glow that rested on the plain.

"What adventuress?"

"Etoile."

"Oh, yes, she is in her solitude at Rocaldi."

"Always at Rocaldi?"

"Yes."

"Is she painting?"

"They say not; she has finished nothing; some say she is ill."

Lady Joan smiled.

"Ill!" she echoed, and she lighted a new cigar. "She has never come to me; never written me a word; I knew she never would when once I had seen my father."

Mr. Silverly Bell sighed; he was always compassionate.

"She is in love with Io, you know—actually sent him letters to Paris!" she continued.

"Indeed?" said Mr. Silverly Bell, cautiously; "and he——?"

"Hates her!" said the Lady Joan. "Io knows nothing about love, you know; he is like me; he only cares for friendship!"

Mr. Silverly Bell coughed; not knowing quite what to say.

Fortunately there was a very fine sunset, and he made a remark on it.

The Lady Joan drove onward with a smile on her face; it pleased her to think of Etoile, ill, with her pictures untouched.

She set down her companions at their respective destinations, and then turned the heads of her steeds to the house of Ioris by the Piazza del Gesù. There was still a dull red glow from the west suffusing the city.

He was absent, but she entered as her habit was, and brushed past his servant up the staircase to his own little chamber.

"I want some papers for your master," she said to him.

The servant dared not oppose her entrance wheresoever she might choose to go. It was quite true that she wanted some papers; papers concerning the new society that had sprung to life under her fostering care; papers that she knew were on his table. The little room was dark, but she struck a match and lit a candle, and began unceremoniously her search amidst the letters, books, and documents of all sorts that were scattered over his bureau. She knew all his ways and all the hiding-places of his desk, and rummaged in them without remorse, searching for what she wanted, the eyes of her own portrait looking down on her from the chamber wall.

Suddenly amidst her search through the mass of business correspondence and ceremonious letters on ceremonials of the

court, she saw a handwriting which made all the blood leap to her face, and her hand seized the note that bore it as a cat seizes prey.

It was a note of Etoile's, written that day, and left by him there in an unwonted carelessness, instead of being consigned to that secret drawer of which his visitor did not possess the secret. He had put it back in its envelope, moved it hastily under a pile of letters, and gone out quickly to go to Rocaldi.

Lady Joan read it.

It was not of great length, but there were words in it that told her all the truth hidden from her so long. She read it thrice; all the blood fading out of her face while her teeth clenched like the jaws of a steel trap.

She had been befooled, beguiled, betrayed. And at length she knew it.

CHAPTER XLIV.

HER first impulse was that of any wounded tigress: to spring and rend and kill.

A sort of madness seized her; in her fury she would have slain him at a blow had he been there before her. A thousand fires flashed before her swimming eyes; a thousand hammers seemed beating on her brain; the room reeled around her; she could have screamed aloud, but her tongue clove to her mouth: she stood and stared down on the letter in the dull light of the flickering taper and knew herself befooled, beguiled, betrayed.

Vengeance alone seemed to her worth living for; to kill them both as tigers kill.

There was fierceness enough in her blood, and strength enough in her nerve, to have driven the steel straight home through flesh and bone without ever wavering once.

But it is women who love, even if they love guiltily, that kill: she loved herself. The little chamber was very still, the light of the taper very dim; in the silence and the calmness and the solitude the paroxysm passed away—she remembered the world.

The fierceness of her fury seethed and hissed itself into a sullen calm; she was alone and there was nothing for the tempest to destroy; it raged, impotent, and spent itself.

Prudence, which soon tempered her passions, to harden them

the more as the cold flood of water hardens the heated steel, returned to her.

What use is it for you to kill any one?

They suffer for ten minutes; you suffer for the rest of your life.

There were other ways than that.

Despite all her vanity, all her credulity, all her willingness to believe the thing she wished, still at the back of her thoughts in the depth of her heart, unadmitted, detested, thrust away, there had always been the latent consciousness that the love of Ioris had passed from her and gone to this other woman whom she hated.

A million little traits came back upon her now that might have told her all the truth long before had not her eyes been blinded by the cataract of an immense and undoubting vanity. Out from the limbo of forgotten trivialities there started to her memory, now, a million trifles of glance, of word, of gesture, that should have told her ere the Lenten lilies had been white, that these two had understood each other in tenderest sympathy and comprehension. All these memories now seemed to dart from their hiding-places and shoot little tongues of flame at her like demons at their play. She had been fooled all the while!

To a vain woman what blow so deadly, what offence so beyond all pardon!

She stood like a stupefied creature, the letter in her hand, till the recollection of her world—the world she lived for—came to her.

Though her rage should choke her, and her hatred strangle her, she must have no scene the world would hear of; no rash, wild vengeance that would level the Temple of All the Virtues with the dust.

Her first impulse was the impulse of every woman that finds herself forsaken for another. Her second instinct was the stronger one of self-interest. Keen, violent, tempestuous as her passions were, one curb lay on them always: the resolve never for them or their indulgence to lose a single advantage, a single practical gain.

To dash his hands away, to strike the lips that had touched another's, to drive him out of her presence under a storm of curses, ay, even to send a trusty blade straight through his breast-bone, these were all her first impulses, fierce, natural, maddened, unthinking. But before her, like a saving spirit to arrest her blows and teach her patience, rose the memory of—Fiordelisa.

To slay Ioris—even to quarrel with him—was to lose Fiordelisa.

Fiordelisa was first; and he but second.

But for Fiordelisa, she would have scourged him from her sight, or have done worse to him; but Fiordelisa was as a silver chain lying on her rage, and keeping it dumb and still.

The years were waning with her, and in a little while men would cease to find sorcery in her smile. If she exiled herself from Fiordelisa, never would she find such another kingdom. never again would winepress and granary be piled full for her gain, and indolence and negligence drop a sceptre to her grasp—never again.

And she knew it.

Though a woman who deluded herself on many things, she had no delusion here.

“You will never find such another fool,” had her husband said once to her in a moment of candour, and she knew very well that she never would—that Cleopatra though she was, her days with Cæsars were done.

Dearer than all passion, sweeter than all vengeance to her, were her scales and her stock-books, her ledgers and her leathern purse, her sway on the breezy wild hills, her rule in the ancient grey halls.

Lose Fiordelisa!

Her heart turned sick, her blood ran cold, at the mere thought.

Have another woman reign there in her stead?—a woman who would hold the old oaks sacred, let the songbirds sing, kneel by the old altars, and bid roses bloom, and children laugh, and peasants be free, and the lord of all be lord in truth?

Never, she swore in her soul, never! never, by all the gods of vengeance, would she be thus dethroned and thus displaced.

Sooner would she hurl torches in the granaries and see the flames rise in a hurricane of fire north and south and east and west till Fiordelisa were a blackened waste!

The terror of this peril calmed her.

Ioris she might furiously have released, or as furiously have struck with her clenched hand and cursed and banished. But Fiordelisa never would she risk!

Therefore burn in anguish, chafe in humiliations as she would, she must needs choke herself into silence and give him no pretext of an angry glance, no opening of a furious word, no hint of her knowledge of his infidelity, no power to seize the liberty that lies in dissension and avowal. She must be silent, let silence cost her what it would.

She sat there in the little darkling room with the taper like a tiny star beside her, and felt that she would sooner lose her life than Fiordelisa.

It was quite night.

Time had fled without her taking any count of its swift

passing. No one had dared disturb her. Ioris had not returned.

Prudence, and the chillier self-control begotten of a supreme self-love, ruled her once more. She put the letter back underneath others as she had found it, and gathered up the papers she had come to seek, and blew the taper out, and groped her way to the door.

On the staircase a lamp was burning; his servant hurried out, hearing her.

"I thought milady was gone long ago," he stammered, wondering.

She controlled her voice to cheerfulness and calm command.

"No, Giannino, your master had left me so much to write; I wish he would do his own work," she said, with her usual familiar laugh, and frank curt way. "Call me some cab, will you; I shall be late home for dinner. Do you know where the Prince is gone?"

Giannino knew very well, but he threw his hands to heaven and swore ignorance.

She went out of the house, and home.

At home she locked herself in her bedchamber and passed the most bitter hour of her life. But when the hour was passed, her resolve was taken.

A weak and tender woman would have broken her heart, a true and impassioned woman would have ruined herself, taking some fleet, fierce revenge to be mourned for with a lifetime of remorse.

She who was always strong and never true, knew better ways than these.

When she heard his laggard step on the stairs and his tired voice in the antechamber, she rose and withdrew the bolts and bade him come to her. When he came she threw her arm about his throat.

"I am feverish and cold, Io; feel my cheeks and my hands. I have been doing too much for you at Fiordelisa. Where have you been all day?"

And she kissed him.

She felt him shudder.

And again she kissed him; having chosen her vengeance—a vengeance that should not lose for her Fiordelisa.

If she had never known the truth she would have been suspicious, importunate, watchful, jealous, angered, curious, always interrogating and always spying; and Ioris would have grown impatient, and soon or late some bitter word would have unlocked the gates of his secret, and the fetters of his bondage, both at once.

But to be forewarned is to be forearmed.

Knowing the truth, and having resolved never to show she knew it, nothing could seem more trustful, no one more unconscious of any rival near her than was she; she seemed completely credulous of all he said, and against her mingled ardour and good faith, devotion and trustfulness, his restless consciousness broke itself bitterly in vain, as waves break powerless on a bank of sand. If she had but broken out into rage once, all would have been said, and he for ever free.

But she kept her temper, like a very Griseldis.

Since the first winter that she had wooed him, he had never known her so tender and so caressing; the harshness of her natural tones was hushed, and the vigilance of her endless espionage was abated. To a woman who suspects you it is easy to say, "I am faithless;" to a woman who trusts you it is very hard to say it.

She knew this so well. She took heed to let no shadow of a doubt ever seem to hover near her. With the snow white on the streets and plains, she spoke with a smile of their coming summer at Fiordelisa.

Now and then carelessly, as of a thing indifferent alike to both, she spoke of Etoile.

"I am glad she has the conscience not to come near me," she said one day. "That shows she knows what my poor father said to me. Does she persecute you, Io, with any more letters?"

"Did I ever say that I was persecuted?" he muttered, as he tuned away impatient with himself.

The Lady Joan laughed pleasantly.

"Oh, no, I dare say you felt very complimented; men always do on their *bonnes fortunes*, do they not, Marjory?"

And the Echo was careful to reply.

"Io looks quite vain, I think! It is not everybody who fascinates a feminine Raffaello who can give his features immortality upon canvas!"

"What folly!" said Ioris, with a dark flush on his cheek. Then Lady Joan and the Echo laughed again.

But that was all.

When he was absent, when he was inattentive, when he was intentionally negligent of her summons, and ceased to accompany her in society or to any public place, she was still a very Griseldis in her patience. She even said to him, "You are right, dear, perhaps to be seen with me less,—people will talk."

But all the while, with all her patience, she made him feel that she held him closely in a very labyrinth of his own weaving, and she never spoke of any coming day or year, or even distant hereafter, but what she spoke of it as something they were quite sure to share together.

There was a sort of hateful anodyne in this security of claim that seemed to drug him and hold him motionless and paralysed, as the fell curare holds the victim that it drugs.

Once she said to him tenderly—

“*Caro mio*, I feel quite ashamed when I think that I made you that scene in Paris. With all your devotion to me, to insult you by any idea that you could be untrue to me for five minutes! I quite hate myself, lo; I do, indeed!”

She would say these things in the noise of a street, in the buzz of society, in the midst of the world, so that they gave him no chance of a reply that might have been the prelude to truth and freedom, but only filled him with a sickly sense of all that she expected, all that she would exact, and of how entirely she took for granted that he was hers for ever.

All this cost her very dear; when hate and fury, dread and jealous fear, were seething together in her, and all her veins were on fire with outraged vanity and the consciousness of his broken faith, to have to keep her fury dumb, to rein in her violence, to caress and smile and be still, and seem to know nothing, and give no vent to any one of the bitter words that every moment sprang up to her lips; all this cost her very dear. But she had served a long apprenticeship in the world to the art of self-repression; and here she held steadily one great aim in view, and it gave her nerve and patience.

Not to lose Fiordelisa; never to lose Fiordelisa. This was her Alpha and her Omega.

A feebler or a franker woman would have jeopardised all in one hour of reproach or of entreaty. But she knew better than to give him any such loophole for escape. A tempest clears the air: she filled her atmosphere with mist, in which, strive as he would for the light, he should lose his path and be for ever lost. Long, long before, hanging her cashmere up in the loggia of Fiordelisa on the first day of her entrance there, she had known that the wisdom for her in the future must be—immovability.

That she must never seem to know, to hear, to see, to feel, any sign that he might ever give that her reign should cease and her steps depart.

To that wisdom she adhered now.

It cost her many bitter hours to cling to it, but it was her sheet anchor and she never let it go. And in her way she was very wise.

Meanwhile Mr. Challoner had returned for Christmas; he never by any chance neglected a domestic festival; the city was full, and teacups and triptychs were in requisition; the mighty cousins were some of them arrived or arriving; the houses that had to be called at were many; Mrs. Grundy and Mrs. Candour were at the head of their serried battalions; and she, as usual,

was busy conciliating, propitiating, purchasing, selling, smiling, entreating, investing, ingratiating; yet she looked ill, and grew very thin, and had a feverish, harassed glance in her eyes.

"It is the great grief she has had," said the Scrope-Stairs.

"It is the superhuman energy she has shown," said Mr. Silverly Bell; and Society said after them, "Great grief—great energy—most laudable—most admirable," and went still oftener than ever to call on her.

She was supposed to have had a great financial success. People are very fond of such success.

Success like that of Etoile is not popular; it seems to be seated on some inaccessible pinnacle whence it seems to shower pity and scorn on mankind. But a success like the mended pot's, monetary, commonplace, practical, comfortable, that is another thing, everybody likes it, everybody trusts it.

Everybody went to her accordingly, and she had many pleasant little occasions on which to drop a word in Everybody's ear.

"Etoile? Oh, dear no! I never see her, never *wish*. She never comes near me since I saw my poor father. If I thought I should meet her anywhere, I should not go there—No. Well, perhaps not worse than other artists! . . . I believe she lays nets for Io. He hates her, but he is very weak. Poor Io! Fancy anybody making a hero of Io! But to be sure, perhaps I cannot judge myself; he has been like a brother to me so long: poor Io!"

For she was of this complexion, that heaven might have been crashing, and the earth reeling to its doom, but she would have been ready to buy cheap a length of lace, or make a desirable acquaintance. It is of this stout stuff that great characters are always made.

She was really wretched; she was really half mad with rage and pain and terror; in sober truth, waking or sleeping, night or day, the thought of her rival was never absent from her. But all the same she neglected none of all the minutiae that Society exacts; she ran up the stairs alike of her studios and her drawing-rooms; she went on her rounds of visits with her husband; and she could still rouse herself and calm herself in a hurricane of hysterics if there came the slightest chance of selling a teacup at a profit.

And when Everybody was gone she would lie on her sofa and take some ether, and say to her maid, "Send for the Prince Ioris, will you, Marianna. Say I am very ill this evening:" when reluctant he obeyed, she would note how cold his glance was, how unwilling his step, how indifferent his voice, and choke with jealous rage in silence in her heart, and pass her hand over his hair and murmur to him, "I am so ill to-night; I

cannot let you go again; *amor mio*, give me those drops—I am faint.”

He bent his knee beside her, sullen and yet contrite. She looked thin, she looked hectic, she looked worn: he could not doubt her love for him, she grew so gentle.

“Would to heaven she would hate me!” he thought: and hated himself.

But she did not hate him.

True there were times when she could have snatched the silver dagger from her hair, and plunged it in his breast, like any jealousy-maddened fisher-girl on the edge of the waves by Amalfi; true there were hours when, knowing how he had fooled her, how he believed he fooled her still, how laggard was his step, how languid his caress, how dark and averted his glance, she could have rent him limb from limb. True there were moments when even yet the fierce, wild temper in her asserted itself, and she was ready to fling the truth in his face and curse him and let him go.

But in her inmost soul she loved him, in her savage selfish way, more than she had ever done in her life; in her heart she felt a sullen respect for him for having so well deceived her; and the sense that his love was gone to another sharpened the passion in her to new keenness, gave it a new birth, a new lease of life, fresh vigour and fresh tenacity. She had grown careless of him, being so very sure he was her toy for life; but now that she knew how slender was her hold, and how at every hour it might snap, she strained every nerve to hold him. Vengeance she would have; but it should be such vengeance as should fetter him for ever and not cast him free.

For in her way she was very wise.

And she lay on her sofa, and took her ether and her morphia, and sent for him, and wound her fingers close about his wrist, and said, “You must not leave me, dear: yes, I feel faint and ill. I shall be strong again with the spring—at our dear Fiordelisa.”

CHAPTER XLV.

"ONE of the women that forgive," he had said of Etoile.

What woman is not of these that loves truly?

She forgave from the depths of her soul, though shuddering she turned from the memory of what it was that she forgave. She forgave, even as he had justly said she would have kissed his hand if it had stabbed her. But even as, had she been stabbed by him, the dulness of death would have come to her through him, so now a great dread and a great humiliation weighed on her and would not pass away.

"You have let her come back, not knowing the truth?" she said to him; and when he could but answer "Yes," with averted eyes and a flush on his olive cheek, she felt a great sense of hopelessness fall upon her.

She was not angered; she did not upbraid him. These are the selfish ways of little and vain natures. She loved him so much that she shut her lips over all reproach or rebuke. But she began to comprehend that his will was much as are the reeds by the river, and his promise unstable as the winds that wander amidst the reeds; and this was more terrible to her than any peril of circumstance could have been. Against circumstance, the strong nature will rise dauntless and unwearied, however long or painful be the conflict; but against the woes that spring from character, the bravest is powerless. No one can alter nature.

Dully and slowly Etoile awoke to the consciousness that when she had thought that she loosened the toils from about his feet, she had but wound them about herself as well.

He soothed her with tender words. He reassured her with earnest promise. He begged of her only to have patience a little while longer, and said that all would be well. She listened and obeyed, fearing to rouse the mysteries and dangers that seemed to lie about his path. She did not understand, therefore she was afraid to move. On one thing only was she resolute.

"If I see her——" she said, with a shudder, to him, "If I see her—which I pray heaven to spare me—I cannot speak to her, or look at her; she must think of me what she will."

"Surely: would I ask you to know her now?" he answered; and he did feel that not for an empire would he have the hands of these women meet; and Etoile would not have been what he loved if she could have smiled upon her foe and his destroyer.

Yet in his heart, though he hated himself for the transient emotion, he felt a momentary impatience, a momentary wish that she were of lighter temper like others, and took things less deeply. He had been used to a world in which the wife smiled on her husband's mistress; the husband on the man that dishonoured him; the bitterest foes were the best friends in seeming, and the rivalry, the intrigue, the crime, the enmity of the hour, were all alike concealed beneath a surface of courtesy and cordiality, and the friendship of society was but a mask for lusts, for treachery, for hatreds. He loved her because she was not like this world; yet habit and usage made him for an instant wish that she would stoop to its convenient hypocrisies, its bland untruths.

"What would it cost her to be ostensibly friends with her rival for a few brief weeks till I am free?" he thought; and then he repented of the thought, and felt that it was unworthy both of himself and her. And how did he mean to take his freedom? He did not know. He drifted; trusting to chance. He had lost his opportunity. Opportunity is our good angel, but if when it knocks we do not open quickly, it goes away from us, rarely to return. He was in the mist and twilight of a great dilemma, and as one little cloud spreads all over the heavens till the earth is dark with storm, so one hesitating and timid untruth spreads into a night of falsehood, a shipwreck of life and love.

Etoile, who all her life had been strong because she had been aloof from mankind and indifferent to human pains and joys, and wrapped in the lofty egotisms of the arts, Etoile was now weak as the weakest; every woman is so that loves greatly. In a great love, the eyes are blinded, the lips closed, the ears deaf, the will paralysed; only beholding, only breathing for, only hearing, only obeying, one other life out of all the millions upon earth: and nothing short of this is love.

She was weak, and weakness is ever unwise. She shrank from any chance of meeting the woman whom it made her burn with shame to think was still her rival. She shrank from any obligation of going into the routine of society, and greeting, or passing by, as some mere acquaintance the lover who was all the world to her. All the trivial untruths, the conventional masquerades that society regards as venial, indeed as right and wise, were to her cowardly and guilty evasions; she could not stoop to them. She would keep silence since he wished it; she would bear pain if it pleased him to lay it on her; she would even submit to injurious construction and slanderous comment if it came to her through obedience to his will. But she would not act a social lie; therefore she shut her doors on the world and would not go out to it, and let it babble what it might of her.

She was very happy still, very often she believed that he

scarcely saw her rival; she was full of faith in his words and in her future. She withdrew into solitude, because solitude was sweeter to her than any companionship when he was absent. She prayed for him, she smiled on him often when she could have wept in his absence; she gave herself to art for his sake, that he might still be proud of her.

Alas! prayer was of no avail; nor tenderness, nor love nor any delicacy or constancy of faith. To save him she needed to have been of coarser fibre, of colder heart, of tougher mould; she needed to have been blunt and fierce and subtle and resolute like her foe.

Ariel could not combat a leopardess; Ithuriel's spear glances pointless from a rhinoceros' hide. To match what is low and beat it, you must stoop; and soil your hands to cut a cudgel rough and ready. She did not see this; and seeing it, would not have lowered herself to do it.

She withdrew herself into solitude, and loved him as one woman perhaps loves once in a century. It seemed to her that it was all that she could do; that it must be enough, since he loved her.

But it was not enough; because he was not alone; restless, ruthless, ever-present, avaricious of every moment, unscrupulous in every guile, fierce as a driving sirocco, and penetrating everywhere like the sirocco's sand, her rival was for ever beside him.

If she had gone down into the mud of the arena and fought with the same weapon as her foe, she would have vanquished; but pride held her back, and love, and faith, which would not insult him: she stayed aloof and could not struggle with what was base basely.

So the day of battle waned and went against her.

The same crowd on the Pincio spoke of her that had spoken the year before, only with interest less lively because she was no more a novelty.

"She is always in Rome?"

"Yes, at Rocaldi."

"What does she do at Rocaldi?"

"Humph—well—ah!"

Then people laughed, no one knew very well why.

"Does she send to the Salon this year?"

"Nothing."

"Is she ill?"

"Nobody knows."

"One sees her driving?"

"Oh, yes, you may see her driving."

"Not in society?"

"Not in society this year."

"Very odd."

"Such women are always odd."

"She seems to shut herself up like a nun; perhaps the big dog is a man in disguise."

Then everybody laughed again, and thought they were witty.

On such a congenial temper of society, and into minds so well prepared, the voice of her foe and its echoes easily dropped well-chosen words.

Lady Joan was in mourning and could not go out in the evening, but she called upon people assiduously and received them at home on her Wednesdays, there being nothing in tea and talk against woe.

"So sorry you should ever have been exposed to meeting her here," she said, with cordial apology and a sad tone in her voice; "so very, very sorry. But my poor dear father's name was used without his knowledge; his very last words to me almost were in anger about her; oh, for myself I do not mind; I am not prudish; but for all my dear friends who met her here—I feel I cannot make atonement enough."

Then she would smile a little and add: "It is so tiresome for poor Io; she has taken such a fancy for him, and now that she does not come here she never sees him of course, and she is always teasing him—sending after him. He never goes indeed, but still to a man of delicate mind like Io it is painful—yes, artists are always very strange; it is a great pity."

And she would look very frank and very sorrowful, and her echoes would say the same thing a little more faintly, but very faithfully, till Society was all one big echo, singing the same song, like the rocks round a lake.

Mr. Silverly Bell, like the famous Hibernian echo which embroiders variations, would add—"The generous hospitality of Lady Joan so abused! Her noble friendship so slandered! So sad, so shocking, so shameful! No, I have no idea who pays for Rocaldi. Not its tenant—certainly not its tenant. She sends nothing to the Salon this year. Poor Ioris! It all annoys him unspeakably. He never saw her save in the Casa Challoner—never!"

This was what Etoile had done by leaving the field to her foes, whilst scornful of the tongues of the world, and always indifferent to their blame as to their praise, she lived on in her solitude, counting the hours till they brought Ioris. He told her that he scarcely saw her rival; never save when the complications of their entangled affairs made it unavoidable. To doubt him was very difficult to her. To watch him was impossible.

Out of an exaggerated sense of the honour due to him she would never utter his name to others; never pass down a street

where it could seem as if she watched him; never take any means, not the most innocent, to ascertain whether what he said were true or false. He loved her, and that was enough. He was master of both their fates.

"So you have withdrawn yourself to your rock in the middle of the sea, or rather in the middle of your vineyard," said Lady Cardiff to her one day, with approval in her phrases, but vexation in her soul. "Well, no doubt you are very wise, my dear. Every one to his taste. Perhaps it is better to drop society altogether unless you conform to it altogether, and make it pleasant to you by being pleasant to itself, painting your eyebrows, tittle-tattling, wearing your gowns half way down your spine, finding an H.R.H.'s impudence honour, kissing your worst enemy, being prettily fickle and smilingly false, and making yourself generally placable and affable. As you will not do that, perhaps the rock in the middle of the sea—or the vines—is best for you, as his skylight was for Victor Hugo. I am sure I dare not say it isn't. Only it does seem a pity, at your age, with your talents, to shut yourself up in a sort of Paraclete with a lot of palm-trees. It does seem a pity. To be sure, there is Tsar."

"There is always Tsar," said Etoile, with a smile.

"And Ioris," thought Lady Cardiff, with impatience and discontent.

"Ioris embellishes a Paraclete, no doubt," she mused to herself. "But she is making a terrible error. She loves with the immortal love of the poets, and he with the trivial passion of the world. I am sure of it, as sure as if they were both before me. And what is the use of secluding herself under her palm-trees? Seclusion will not beat that bully who owns him. On the contrary, she should be always in the world, always taking away her foe's friends, countermining her foe's mines, shining, succeeding, giving her lover hosts of rivals to fear, showing him always her own power, her own triumph, her own caprices. That is the way that rivals are beaten, and men are retained. But she does not see it. If she did see it, she would not do it. She will wait under her palms for him to come to her. Whenever he ceases to come, then she will break her heart and live alone till she dies. I always used to wonder how Heloise, with all her sense and knowledge and genius, and Greek and Latin, ever could let Abelard beat her. I don't wonder since I have known Etoile. I am quite sure Ioris beats her—metaphorically speaking—just because he has been so tired of being beaten himself. Ah, dear me! why couldn't the fates have been kinder and have left that other woman on her housetop in Damascus!"

But Lady Cardiff was a *grande dame* and a wise person, too high-bred to speak of what did not concern her, so she thought all this only in vexed silence, and merely said with a pleasant smile—

"To be sure there is always Tsar."

Tsar, who at that moment was tossing in play, in the air over his head, a man's glove—a glove that belonged to the slender, soft, long hand of Ioris.

Lady Cardiff saw that it was a man's glove, but she said nothing.

"You have heard of my poor friend; of Dorotea?" said Etoile hurriedly, to alter the subject.

"Yes; I have heard."

"Is not the world bitterly cruel? Can there be a viler sentence—a more hideous injustice?"

"Perhaps the one the world will pass on you will be as much so," thought Lady Cardiff, as she answered aloud: "You hear nothing from herself?"

"Nothing—now—for many months."

"But you believe in her innocence?"

"As I believe that the sun shines in the heavens."

"Dear me! Yet she is worse than dead?"

"Worse than dead!"

The tears rolled down the cheeks of Etoile as she spoke, and she turned away. Life, from one lovely, classic, cold vision of all the arts, had changed and become to her a thing so exquisitely beautiful, so fearfully terrible, that she grew dizzy in its midst.

Lady Cardiff glanced at her, and said aloud pleasantly—

"My dear, Tsar will tear that glove. Is it yours?"

"It is Irene's. He spoils Tsar very much," said Etoile unthinkingly, and then she grew a little pale, being afraid that she had betrayed the secret of her lover.

"Ioris? Ah! he is very fond of dogs. Lady Joan beats them," said Lady Cardiff tranquilly.

The colour burned in the face of Etoile. She was silent.

"After all," mused Lady Cardiff, "Paraclete is more like common humanity than one thought. That is a comfort."

But a vague apprehension was upon her, and she went away; once more too, engrossed and too pained to care to read her *Figaro*, which was the effect that her visits to what she called Paraclete always produced on her.

The *Figaro* was equally interesting and veracious that day. It contained, like many other journals of Europe at that epoch, the full account of the suit of the Duc de Santorin against his wife, known to the world as Dorotea Coronis—a suit in which the husband was completely triumphant, with a triumph chiefly due to the letters of a dead lover that he placed before the judge.

"Why will people write letters?" said Lady Cardiff to herself, with a tender pity for human nature. "Were there any entanglements before people took to letter-writing? I don't think there can have been. Every bother and show-up that we

have, come out of letters now-a-days. How nice and safe it must have been with only flowers for correspondence, as they had in the East before we civilised it. If a marigold or a clove-pink had been found, and meant anything dreadful, you could always have said it was a mistake of the gardener's. Santorin himself couldn't have taken a marigold or a clove-pink into court."

She drove on to the Pincio and got out and walked, and found every one talking of the Santorin suit, and full of sympathy for the husband.

"She would never sing a note after the Russian died. *That* was proof of guilt enough!" said lovely Mrs. Desart.

"And she is gone into a convent in Spain," added Lady Eye-bright.

"She should have gone there before," said Mrs. Desart."

"Why do convents open their doors to such women?" said Lady Joan Challoner, severely.

"But the letters were no proof of her infidelity," said a man who thought with a pang of that fairest face and that loveliest voice veiled and dumb in a living grave. "The letters clearly reproached her with cruelty, with coldness. I cannot see myself——"

"There were the plainest possible proofs of criminal intercourse," said Lady Joan and Mrs. Desart and Lady Eyebright together. "The letters proved it, and if they did not, the servants' testimony did——"

"A maid she had discharged and a valet of Santorin's! The old Spanish woman swore to her utter innocence——"

"The old Spaniard was in her dotage: the judge said so. Besides, the Russian was not the *first*——"

"Oh, mesdames——!"

"She was a most profligate creature. To think she should have so often sung to our Queen——!"

Lady Cardiff put her glass in her eye:—

"She wasn't divorced then, my dear Lady Joan. Anybody adorned with the Scarlet Letter that is not a *divorcée* may come to Court, so I suppose they may sing at it. It is the Victorian rule. It has many conveniences——"

Lady Joan winced, but was stern in her justice.

"It serves Santorin right for marrying a person out of the mud like that," she said still severely. "What could he expect? Artists are always the same. And it will be so hard upon him now. He won't be able to marry unless she dies."

"You think it hard on men not to be able to marry? How nice of you! But then all marriages are not as happy as yours, dear Lady Joan," said Lady Cardiff, and she turned to Mr. Challoner.

"Santorin takes two millions from her under his marriage contract. Rather bathos, that, don't you think? If Menelaus had taken two millions from Helen, would Greece have sympathised? One doesn't know. Morals alter so, and manners. Ours seems a lucrative age for husbands, doesn't it? If she could have gone on singing and paying his debts, I am sure he would never have brought his suit. No?"

Mrs. Challoner reddened, and said something vague about no payment of debts compensating any gentleman for dishonour.

Lady Cardiff went onward meditatively.

"Dear, dear!" she thought to herself, "that singing-woman is dying in a convent, and our feminine Raffaele leaning on a reed that will pierce her heart like a spear some day! Dear, dear! what is the use of being born with the Muse in you if you cannot take better care of yourself than that? The woman was innocent — yes, certainly innocent; the letters prove, if they prove anything, how she strove against her love for her lover's sake; and yet if she were singing anywhere, virtuous women like Lady Joan and the Desart could not hear her, and the very theatres would be scandalised, and very likely hiss! What an admirable century! Royal courts are severe as Rhadamanthus on the morals of the few that sing at a State concert; the twelve hundred that come to listen may have sinned as they liked; that don't hurt a Court at all!"

Left alone, Etoile paced restlessly to and fro the long terrace on which the dog had been at play with the glove.

The fate of her friend Dorotea had filled her with pain and indignation, though she had heard nothing more than what the world knew, or since the moment that she had been told of Fédor Souroff's death, Dorotea Coronis had died herself to the world: all ties and memories of living things or living friends had perished from her. But to Etoile also had come that supreme absorption of love in which other affections perish, and nothing in the wide world seems to matter so that one life lives and is near. She understood now Dorotea Coronis as she had not understood her on her first night in Rome: that was all.

The world often rails at this isolation and absorption of passion as an egotism, but it is in truth its highest sublimity.

Love that remembers ought save the one beloved, may be affection, but it is not love.

The name uttered before her in union with her lover's had cut to her very soul.

It was to avoid this pain, this humiliation, this bitterness which she could not resent, that she had shut herself in loneliness here, letting the world that liked to chatter of her give what motive it would to her solitude.

Was it possible that in that world they still deemed him her rival's?

Her cheeks burned, her pulse throbbed high, as she paced to and fro in the late, chilly day. How long was it to last, this secrecy, this silence, this mystery! She was everything to him, and she seemed to be nothing.

She had accepted this position because it was of his doing and his choice, but she had been always impatient of it. To the woman whose courage had been contemptuous and daring to a fault, no sacrifice could have been so hard as this demand to bear with a cowardice and mask a truth.

She had been shut in her solitude till she had forgotten how the world went on; she remembered it with a shudder now.

Was it possible that in the world he still passed as the lover of another?

No: he was hers. That was enough.

She would not wrong him with a doubt. He had told her such doubt was insult.

So she paced her lonely terraces in the red wintry afternoon, and trusted him, and when his step was heard and his hand touched hers, asked nothing more of him or heaven.

"When I am not there, she is alone and dreams of me," Ioris said to himself, and that knowledge made him careless.

If her nature would have let her do so, it would have been wiser to have had her painting room full of worshippers and her hours full of pleasures and ambitions; he would have been insecure and anxious to keep his power, and would have hastened to cry to all others, "Stand off—she is mine!"

For men are made so.

Moreover the complexities and contradictions of his own nature were at war. He liked the very peril of his path; he was glad once more to steal unseen by moonlight to a tryst that none could know. Long obliged to pass through a crowd under a blare of trumpets to a mistress who loved her vanity far more than he, this silence and this solitude was precious to him. Silence and solitude are the twin divinities of love that guard its portals while it dreams; but the Lady Joan had detested them: like the old sovereigns of Rome she thought no victory of worth without its triumph moving down the public ways. He had been bound so long behind her chariot, jaded and impatient of the throngs that jeered, that the sweet sense of imperious mastery both of the woman he loved, and of the secret of his love, came to him with the delight of variety, the charm of power. Etoile had seemed to him at first like Del Sarto's Sebastian, with the palm and arrow, and uplifted eyes, looking for higher things than earth can give. It was sweet to him to bend the palm and break the arrow and make the eyes sink earthward and see only his.

In all the feverish pangs of love there is none sharper than that with which the woman, who is loved in secret, sees the life that is her own passing in the crowd of the world amidst other women, aloof from her, as a friend, as a stranger, whilst she must hold her silence, and give and take from him the empty phrases of ceremonial and custom; for a little while it is sweet, that contrast between solitude and society; that soft, secret tie; that tender complicity undreamed of by others; for awhile it is very sweet, but afterwards it grows into a fretting pain and brings a sense of galling bitterness.

To Etoile the pain of it was doubly galling, because in all her life she had never stooped to seem the thing she was not.

"Love loses its loveliness made public; it is like the grapes, once handled, the bloom is gone," he said to her, seeking to reconcile her; and it was a truth, but only true of love that does not speak to any, out of supreme indifference to all except itself; not true of love that dares not avow itself, and tells a lie.

At other times he said to her, "Wait, dear, wait but a very little more; then all the world shall know that I—such as I am, and most unworthy—am all yours."

And she loved him so well that the mere sound of his voice—say what sophistry it would—was her paradise.

"She is nothing to you?" she murmured to him that day, and hid her face on his breast as she asked it, because the question hurt her and seemed to her shameful.

"Do you dishonour me with the doubt?" he said petulantly and with anger; and she asked his forgiveness. She was not wise now, nor strong: she only loved him very greatly.

CHAPTER XLVI.

"HAVE I chosen the right way?" the Lady Joan asked herself again and again, with rage and fear at her heart.

She knew all that he did with his time now, being once on the trace of his trespass; she knew the hours that he passed with her rival; she knew the way in which he spent evenings for which he accounted to herself with a thousand specious excuses. When these excuses were palmed off on her, she, knowing the truth, felt at times as if she must strike him dead; but she held her peace staunchly, and smiled, and accepted what he said. Was it the right way? Sometimes she doubted, sometimes a spasm of dread seized her; but she knew men and their weakness and their impulses; her experience told her that there was no other way half so sure. So she wore her mask.

It was an iron mask, and hurt her; but she wore it staunchly, never loosening it, however great the strain. She never let it drop before any living creature, not even before plump Mimo, from whom she had no secrets; not even before her watchdog who had put her on the trail.

"I cannot forgive myself for ever introducing poor Io to Etoile; she will end in entangling him; she is clever and he is so weak," she would say to the former; and to the latter add, with a smile, "Io comes to me every day to complain of that woman, and her passion for him. I laugh at him for being so fatally attractive. It does seem so absurd to *us*, dear—doesn't it?—that anybody can see a hero in Io! Of course we are all of us fond of him; but Io will never set the Thames or the Tiber on fire."

Marjery Scrope could only listen and feel a thrill of envious wonder at her friend's coolness and skill. She herself could not wear a mask like that; she could only feebly imitate her greater leader, and murmur in turn to Society: "Oh, no, we never see her now; we do not feel we could; we have heard so very much. . . . They say, too, that she pretends there is something wrong between our good dear friend and Ioris. As if *we* did not know! as if anybody could know as *we* do! So absurd, you know; so cruel; so like a woman who errs herself, and judges every one by her own errors. Oh, no, indeed, you need never fear meeting her at our house; we never see her now; we should not receive her."

So the three sisters brewed the sulphur fumes in their

cauldron, and in that cauldron, as also in the Temple of All the Virtues, the name of Etoile was daily sacrificed as a votive offering to the kind gods of Calumny; those gracious and just gods who never frown when their priests are pleased or when the baked meats are plenteous.

And Silverly Bell would shake his head, which he always found more effective than words; shake his head and sigh profoundly.

Society understood that the sigh meant all kinds of unmentionable sin.

Of a woman who had ceased to receive, as Etoile had done, who dwelt aloof from the world, and made it feel that it was less to her than the grasses under her feet in the fields, Society was always ready to believe anything.

"Oh, you noble imbecile! Oh, you noble but most absolute imbecile!" thought Lady Cardiff, in a futile frenzy of irritation at the seclusion of Etoile. "Why don't you understand; why don't you understand? Have twenty lovers, and nobody'll say anything; but to have *one*! . . . It is a standing insolence to all the rest of our sex. If you *must* have only one, and if that one must be some one else's perjured Launcelot, there is only one way for you to get yourself and Launcelot pardoned, and to beat black-browed Guinevere out of the field and be victorious—only one way: throw open your house, give dinners, go out everywhere, smile on everybody, be *en évidence* every day; make Guinevere look a disagreeable, stingy, and shabby nobody beside you; then the world will go with you, most likely, and never ask if you have only one lover or have twenty. But to shut yourself up, and merely live for perjured Launcelot, and when he is absent model clay, and paint on panels, what can the world of women make of you when you do this? You belong to *lusus naturæ*, *feræ naturæ*—unlike everything and everybody. Of course they will stone you, as village bumpkins run out and stone an odd stray bird that they have never seen before; and the more beautiful the plumage looks, the harder rain the stones. If the bird were a sparrow the bumpkins would let it be."

But Lady Cardiff could only think her thoughts, not utter them, being too high-bred to interfere in any one's destiny unasked, and could only say, when she heard the stones pelting in Society:—

"Etoile? Oh, dear, yes; of course I know her; of course I go to her. Why not? Everybody did go last year; I should go if nobody did. It is very uncommon, you know, to see a woman who paints everything except her face, and who thinks Milton and Sophocles better company than ourselves. Odd? Yes, very odd; that I grant, but interesting. An adventuress, is

she? Ah, I didn't know it. Does it matter? I thought she was a great artist. I may be mistaken! I am *not* mistaken? Then why an adventuress? I do not quite understand. Same thing, is it?"

And then Society winced under Lady Cardiff's eyeglass and her courtly smile; and, feeling that it looked foolish to her, felt so.

But one swallow does not make a summer, nor does one friend, or fifty, suffice to stem the tide of enmity that is popular. The world, as a rule, was always angered with a woman whom it had crowned, and who did not care for it; who valued a dead poet or a living daffodil more highly than itself; and who shut herself in a solitude that looked scornful, with her marbles and her canvas. When it found a weakness in her it shouted with joy and rained its stones. It was sweet as the rotten apples in Schiller's desk to the vulgar.

Her foe knew how to hold up rotten apples in the light and vow she found them on her. The world believed. The world, being made up of human beings, is very human; it believes what it likes to believe.

Ioris knew it; it angered him, but he let the sulphur fumes rise and the echoes ring.

"It is always so with what they envy," he said to himself, and it seemed to him that she was more his own—thus isolated.

What were such calumnies? A rain of arrows that would be borne for his sake, as Sebastian bore them for the sake of heaven.

"I am enough for her," he said; and, when his conscience smote him, thought, "It will be all clear some day when they know all; she does not heed it; she is not like other women; the world is nothing to her. I am all."

Besides, the worst he did not know; for the voice that raised the echoes from the rocks was careful to call its worst in a language that was unfamiliar to him. Past his ear when it was strained to listen, the voice of the Lady Joan went down the wind calling aloud on Calumny, but always calling in English; and Calumny that looked the other way when she herself was sinning, and went by like a meek dog, mute, leaped up like a mastiff at her call, and came foaming at the mouth.

For Lady Joan was a great administrator, and could manage even Calumny: it never bit her, and, when she wished it, flow on any foe she had.

The close of Carnival came, and the revels of the Veglione with it—the Veglione for so many years so dear to the soul of the Lady Joan, with its noise and glare, its malice and mischief, its shrieks and suppers, its travesty of mirth, its blasphemies of love.

It was a bitterly cold night, and Ioris shivered as he left Etoile when the twelfth hour struck and went out into the frosty air.

"I have masses of correspondence to look into and answer by dawn," he murmured as he kissed her, and left her there, amidst her palms and ferns, her bronzes and casts, her unfinished work in clay and on canvas.

Then, with reluctant step and sinking heart, he went down into the heart of the city, to the gaslit and crowded vestibule of the Apollo, thronging with black dominoes and many-coloured masquers, and up the stairs of the theatre to the ball that he had gone to, year after year, on such nights as these, and, opening the door of it, saw shining eyes through a vizard of satin, and heard a voice shout with malicious glee:—

"Take me downstairs, Io, quickly! I have changed my rosette; not a soul will know me."

He gave her his arm sullenly and silently. His thoughts were back in the silent shadowy chambers where another woman, in the pale light of her oil lamps, was putting the last touch to his own bust in marble.

"Thus you seem always with me," had said Etoile as they had parted; and he had left her and had come to the opera-ball.

He descended to the tumult and turmoil, to the fumes of the wine and the smoke, to the screeching and whooping of masks—to the old worn-out, stale, stupid roystering.

His companion's hand clutched his arm tightly; her voice pierced his ear as she hissed her innuendoes to others, or screamed the shrill whoop of the place. Year after year they had passed through the same things. He was sick of it, he loathed it, and loathed himself for coming to it; but Lady Joan was triumphant.

She knew whence he had come; and she said once to him, "Poor dear Io! your head aches? That comes of sitting all alone all your evening over those tiresome papers." He muttered a vague assent, and did not notice the glance, like the flash of sharp steel, that darted at him from the eyeholes of her mask.

As he walked, deafened and weary and answering mechanically all those who challenged or laughed, he was wondering to himself why he had not had the courage to tell her the truth that night in the old garden-paths of Fiordelisa—wondering why he had not the courage now.

No one knew that she was here save her tried friends Mimo and Guido, who were very sure to keep her secret. The world supposed her still deep in crape and sorrow, safe in seclusion; and Mr. Challoner, who for once might not have condoned so

great an offence to Society, was for the moment in Venice on affairs connected with his shepherd's crook and flock.

This was the sort of merry *scappata* in which her most happy temperament rejoiced, and gambolled as gamibols a young goat.

When she was tired of the boards below and of the yelling throng and went upstairs to her niche in the third circle, she was in the highest spirits, or at least appeared so. There were none who knew her but her old friends. She ate her *caviare* with a relish, and cried aloud:—

"Didn't you know that black domino that leaned against this door, Io? Oh, for shame! I did. It was your Corinna—Etoile!"

Ioris grew very pale: he knew it was a lie, but the lie infuriated him.

"*She* here!" he said bitterly. "What are you dreaming of? That she is like yourself?"

She controlled her rage with the wonderful strength that self-interest and self-mastery had given her even in her wildest fury. She laughed aloud.

"My dear Io, take care what you say; she may poignard us going out. Give me a sandwich. Etoile most certainly: why not? Come to watch you! You cannot be adored by a Corinna without being bored by it. Isn't she a Corinna? Wasn't Corinna a Muse no better than she should be? Guido, let us drink to the Tenth Muse, who is not like me; the Tenth Muse who adores Io, and who is watching at the door with a dagger, I dare say!"

And she laughed and emptied her glass. Ioris sat silent, his arms folded, his head bent.

There were the other men present; he could not speak; it seemed to him like profanation to even defend the woman who was absent in such a place as this.

He saw nothing of the scene before him—of the black mask, the glittering eyes, the glare of gas: he saw Etoile, in the white serge of her working dress, with the drooping fronds of the ferns behind her, and her hand on the marble moulded in his likeness.

On the morrow Lady Joan said to her friends, with a frank regret in her voice—

"Those men that went to the Veglione last night tell me that Etoile was there, actually there, and following Ioris everywhere. Poor Io! who only went because, as one of the club, he was obliged to entertain. I feel such pain, I really do, that an accidental rencontre with her in our house should have brought about such a nuisance and scandal. And Io is such a gentleman, you know: all the old chivalrous ideas of honour; he will

not even allow that she is to blame, though it is quite too annoying for him. What a horrid noise, by the way, all those masquers made going home! I could not sleep the least all night for them—could you?”

On the morrow, Ioris, with his eyes heavy and his head hot from the stupid noisy tumult of the night, went and found Etoile as he most cared to think of her, in her white working dress, in her studio, amidst the marbles and the panels.

She looked to him, as compared with that other, like one of her own cool, pale roses, beside a tumbled gas-lit red camellia.

He sighed as he looked.

She put her arms about his throat.

“What is there to make you sigh? Tell me. If you would only trust me—quite!”

“I do trust you—entirely. I was only thinking what gross and foolish beasts men are, and that to be loved by you one ought to be (as a friend of yours once said) *Petrarca* at the least.”

“I do not want *Petrarca*: I want only you.”

“You have me, my angel: such as I am.”

She looked in his eyes with a hesitating fear.

“Wholly—always? Are you sure?”

“Wholly and always.”

And he kissed her.

“That other is my weariness, my bane, my care,” he thought. “No more. That is truth before heaven. No more.”

No more! But to be that is so much.

It is to be as the lichen on the tree, as the rust on the steel, as the canker in the plant, as the mildew in the air. It is to penetrate, to weaken, to obscure, to entangle, to destroy, invisibly, imperceptibly, but certainly with the certainty of death.

Travellers in Western forests of virgin lands tell how strange and sad a sight it is to see a tall and stately tree, in all its pride of leaf and crown of blossoms, striving in vain to stretch upward to air and light under the clasping, strangling masses of its parasite creepers, that climb aloft on it and stifle it, till it becomes no more than a mere leafless shaft, borne down by what caresses it.

Whoever looks on a man's life strangled under the parasite of a worn-out yet persistent passion sees the same sorrowful sight as the wanderer in the Western wilds. The death of the tree in the forest is like the moral death of the man who is held by what he knows to be base. The tree strains upward, pines for fresh air, and struggles beneath the enervating and paralysing

thing it nourishes, but all in vain. The poisonous parasite is the stronger.

The days and the weeks went on now, and he was not free, though the woman he loved and deceived believed him to be so.

He thought that he did not deceive her, because that other was to him, as he said, only his weariness, his bane, his ruin; because each touch of her rough hand had grown hurtful to him; because each glitter of her watchful eyes made him nervous and restless; because he only bore with her as a man may bear with an adder about his wrist, because he fears its mortal bite if he stir it.

"I am yours only," he said to Etoile, and deemed it no falsehood, because all that there was in him of heart, and mind, and soul, and tenderness, and passion—all were hers; and to that other he rendered only such sullen counterfeit of unwilling and unreal emotions as were wrung from him by her insistence and his hesitation. A passive obedience counts not as loyal service. A forced assent means nothing.

So he told himself and bade his conscience be still when, with a heavy sense of guilt, he sat beside his tyrant, and heard her speak of future summers in his old home together, and bent his reluctant head to the ardours of her greeting or her lingering "Good-night."

Looking back over the waste of years since she had crossed his path, he saw them strewn with lost time, lost talents, lost hopes, lost honour, lost fortune—all lost by her or through her, and gone for evermore. Yet she was like the adder on the wrist, the parasite on the palm: he dared not stir, he could not reach the light of heaven. She saw that well enough: she was no longer blind. But she only drew closer round him, as the adder round the wrist, as the creeper round the tree.

For her passions might be weak, but she was strong.

The earth was once more sweet with the honey-smell of the golden tulips in the springing corn, and the darkness of the bay and the laurel were starred all over with little white blossoms, and springtime was here.

Lady Joan sat alone in her Turkish room.

It was dusky and heavy with the smell of stale smoke; the flowers brought there faded in it. She did not care for the honey-smell of those cups of a gold she could not coin, and she only liked the bay and the laurel because their berries fattened the blackbirds for the market-stall.

It simplifies life not to be a poet.

She sat in the Turkish room all alone, and her face was dark, her eyes were clouded, her teeth were clenched. She knew how he spent the hours absent from her, and he was absent now.

She was Argus-eyed, and had as many ears as Vishnu. She saw, heard, understood, all that moved him, all that he concealed. She had borne it long and with the stern patience that only the consciousness of a great aim could give. She meant to have vengeance and Fiordelisa—both the two sides of the shield that should hang up in the halls of her triumph.

She sat in the darkened room, and thought; she was alone, and she knew where he was. It seemed to her as if her patience would burst its bonds, her vengeance outstrip her wisdom, her heart break from her bosom: yet she was strong to keep silence. Until he spoke she would not speak.

Time does so much and fate works so well for those who know how to wait ere they strike.

The rumble from the streets filled her ears; stray lines of sunshine shone in through the dusk of the room; she thought of him there, at the feet of Etoile, under the green palms where the nightingales sang at eventide All these months he had fooled her thus!

In her black garb, with a silver dagger run through her dusky braids, with her stern lips close shut, and her eyes dark and stormy as a tempestuous midnight, she looked a woman to take a vengeance that should have rung through Europe: to strike one blow, and see her lover dead, then sheathe the dagger in her breast.

She looked so; as she sat, her clenched hand resting on a steel cuirass of old armour that lay near: her own namesake of D'Are had not had more bitter purpose on her brows; a Cleopatra infuriated had not had more foiled fierce passion in her gloomy eyes.

Alas! the age is an age of prose, and she was in unison with her age.

The old armour but lay there to be sold to a collector expected on the morrow, and she, instead of wrenching the dagger from her hair, took out some letters.

"That will do," she muttered, much as Iago said, "'twill serve."

In the many vicissitudes of her adventurous years she had made many friends; she had made one in especial very useful to her. He was only a little common attorney, but he was a very clever little attorney; not at law, of which he had left the public pursuit, though he kept its wisdom packed up in his brain, but in speculation—vague and gorgeous speculation in distant unseen places, in Southern or Western waters, whence it was easy to return, with silver mines, and diamond fields, and lodes of lead, and stories of savage princes with squalid palaces, but with generous souls; a quite invaluable little attorney: always running out above all to the Coral Isles that lie in the glow of

the setting sun in the pellucid seas of the peaceful Pacific, and running back again with romantic Marco Polo stories, and producing any kind of prospectus to suit the money marts and 'changes of all countries—a little attorney that she corresponded with, caressed, petted, almost loved, because he was so useful to her, and called Theodore, with that pleasant touch of intimate friendship which had characterised her since the earliest days when all mankind first became her "brothers" under the shadow of Mount Lebanon.

Her letters were from Theodore.

He was not in the Coral Isles in the pellucid seas, but in the office that knew her so well in the foggy courts of the City of London. He had brought a gigantic enterprise from the Coral Isles—an enterprise that was only as yet an idea, as even a leviathan at the commencement of its existence is an embryo.

Lady Joan loved ideas—when other people took them for facts.

The idea was to run railways through all the Coral Isles, and steamers between them; at least, not indeed to run them, because Theodore did not much think they would ever be made, but to obtain the concession for making them, which is all to which sensible people ever commit themselves. Theodore had peculiar advantages in the Coral Isles; he had, or said he had, a few coral reefs, a few spice forests, a few sugar plantations, a few whole islands even; perhaps he had a few savage wives also; at any rate he had many royal savage friends in King Ooo-too-ta, and King Fee-fi-fa, and King Ze-zoo-za, and all the other dusky monarchs of the smiling seas. From Ooo-too-ta, and Fee-fi-fa, and Ze-zoo-za he meant to get all he wanted; and the idea was already sown in many mercantile minds—soil in which a very tiny seed springs up a giant pumpkin.

Concessions are not as slow-growing as coral.

It was of this that Theodore now wrote; it was of this that Lady Joan thought instead of the dagger. She was a woman who was not conscious when she dropped from heroics to bathos. She was a woman who even in the depths of her bathos might look ridiculous, but yet never failed to strike home.

With a dagger one may easily fail; but with her vengeance in specie and speculation she never did.

She sat and studied the letters of Theodore and other letters also: her brow was dark with wrath, and in her eyes was ever and again a lightning flash.

The sheep that were sillier than swine were roaring like wolves from whom meat has been snatched. The transfer did not content them. The foreign workmen, English, Irish, and German, were swearing bitter oaths down by the shores of the Faro of Messina because the new direction was about to employ

native workmen; and these foolish, fierce, foreign creatures, perhaps because they were in a land without beer or potatoes, were roaring louder than wolves, and could not be quieted.

The roaring reached her ear through the means of her correspondents. It solaced, it almost soothed her. She knew it was almost madness to Ioris—Ioris, who would not see the beauty and the excellence of the transfer; Ioris, who felt remorse and cared for honour.

She put this and that together, her hand resting on the old steel cuirass.

Far away in the south were these ravening wolves that he thought it his duty to feed, because by his means they had come where they starved; further still in the Pacific were these coral isles, with the spice forests, and the dusky kings, and the stores of vague and virgin wealth. She had devised a bridge across the waves of Messina: at a bound her imagination and her will went wider afield, and threw a chain of connection from the Sicilian shores to the coral reefs.

He should be told that the coral reefs should be made to feed the ravening wolves.

He should go to the coral reefs.

Weaker women might have deemed it as easy to uproot the dome of St. Peter's and bear it over the mountains. But she quailed before no difficulties; she had compassed harder things.

Having made Society accept herself, what was there too hard for her?

He should go to the coral reefs.

As the eagle lifted Ganymede in its talons and bore him away, so should her mighty will uplift him in its claws and bear him to far isles and distant shores. If he would ever return, who knew, who cared? Shut in a secret drawer she had a foolish scrawl that left her, in event of his death before her, Fiordelisa. He had given the paper long ago; he had half-forgotten it; he attached no import to it. To a man still young Death seems so vague a word to play with, if it please a woman.

"He shall go," she said in her solitude, and her brow cleared. Since her rival was, and his new love, and his fresh passion, and she saw no other means, from his own land he must depart. She did not pause to ask how she would move him; she had done harder things.

She drew her pen and ink to her; and wrote to her Theodore in the dusky den.

"Io's health has broken down under the strain of all this anxiety," she wrote in conclusion. "He is so harassed with his wish to make it all up with the old shareholders. One cannot quarrel with so noble, if exaggerated, a sense of duty. I think your idea will be the very thing for him. I have not named it

to him yet. When the whole affair is quite ripe then we will act; you will tell me. You had better come over; your room is all ready. The voyage with you will do him good, and, who knows? Perhaps we may all come there some day. I have always wished to see those mango groves and those turquoise seas ever since I read 'The Earl and the Doctor.' I must make money somehow; he has spent too much on those howling beasts whom *he* calls victims; and I do very much fear, unless we can help him with these projects of yours, that his pictures will have to be sold, and his palace in the city, too, and heaven only knows what else! Come over, Theo, and be quick about it."

Then she signed "Joan," with a fine flourish.

What did she want with a dagger?

Yet, the letter done, she sat sullen and gloomy whilst the sun died off her casements.

Let vengeance be sweet as it will, it is never so sweet that it can smother the acid and bitter of humiliation and betrayal.

She went out and posted her letters with her own hands, like the wise woman she was, and then she made a series of visits as the sun set.

"Go yourself if you please; not I," said Ioris, with petulant contempt, when he heard of this. He knew her Theodore as a common, scheming, shrewd, and vulgar little person, who had been distasteful to him, that was all.

"Of course I said it in jest," she answered, being too wise to throw her cards on the table. "The idea of my going! The idea of *my* being anywhere except at dear old Fiordelisa! But, jesting apart, *amor mio*, have you any conception, I wonder, of how much you have thrown away on those workmen down by the sea? I have been computing it all. I am afraid you will have to do something—unpleasant. Would you like me to tell you——"

"Another time, another time," he said hastily.

"Very well," said Lady Joan, with the marvellous patience to which she had braced herself. "Only don't blame *me* if you drift into trouble, that's all. By the way, I want a gang of eighty new men put on to work at those new vineyards. Money? You have money for those yelling brutes by the sea, but of course you have no money for useful work at home. By the way, Io, what do you think if our way of planting and irrigating were tried in the Pacific? Theo tells me there are most astonishing capacities for production in the soil out there, but all wasted in bad management, as your lands were till I took them in hand."

"Take the savage isles in hand, then," said Ioris, with some roughness and contempt.

She laughed good-humouredly.

"It's a long way to go, and Fiordelisa can't spare me yet," she said. "I never loved any spot on earth as I love Fiordelisa. How I long for April, to be living under the dear old roof once more; don't you?"

Ioris was silent.

"Since Fiordelisa is mine——" he began with hesitation.

"What is yours is mine," she interrupted him, as she smiled in his eyes. "Ah, yes, dear, I know; it is good of you to say it again, though—— Hush! Some one is coming."

It was Mr. Challoner who entered, his hands, as usual, filled with papers and newspapers.

"This is a very fine idea about the Pacific," he said in his most solemn manner. "It promises extraordinarily well. Theodore always knows. . . . If one could get a capitalist to take it up and issue the shares? A beautiful climate, a delightful voyage, an interesting, unsophisticated people, a soil that is the garden of the world——"

"You are not writing the prospectus yet, Robert," said his wife drily. "I was asking Io if he would like the voyage. The sea air might do him good; he looks so very ill. Those shipwrights worry him so."

"I am almost inclined to go myself," said Mr. Challoner in his usual spirit of self-sacrifice. "I believe there are very beautiful varieties of *ninfea* to be found there, especially the *ninfea rubra*."

"We'll all go some day," said the Lady Joan, with her happy decisiveness; "some day between vintage and spring time, so as not to lose much of Fiordelisa."

Ioris stood between them in the familiar chamber that he had so long frequented, that stifled him between its stuff-draped walls, and the courage was wanting in him, though so strong the longing, to cry to them both, "Let my future be quit of you; stand off! Let me be ruined, but let me at least be free!"

He stood silent, his head bent, his colour changing, as his desire strained against the weakness of his will.

She flashed a glance at him from her keen eyes and read his soul as though he spoke his thoughts. In years bygone she would have burst into tempestuous reproach, into mad rage; but grown prudent with peril and cold in caution, she kept her patience still.

"We will all go together," she said, with her frank and cheerful smile. "You shall go for your water-lilies, Robert, and I for coral, and Io for a fortune. And we will bring the lilies, and the coral, and the fortune all back to Fiordelisa, and be happier than ever!"

Mr. Challoner smiled benignly as far as ever he could be said to smile.

"We will go for the *ninfa* and the coral certainly if you like, my love," he said amiably. "As for the fortune, Ioris must please himself. We have no right to persuade him or even suggest to him; he is his own master; we are only his friends."

There was no one listening to be impressed by it; but Mr. Challoner never dropped the stage toga and the stage tones even in the privacy of intimate friendship.

The Lady Joan went out and paid more visits.

"Theodore—you remember Theodore White?" she said to several people. "He was staying with us at Fiordelisa two years ago, and in the winter too. You know he has vast influence in the Pacific; yes, in all those wondrous tropical spicy isles we read about and feel never to believe in; he saved some savage king's life there; and he has great possessions there; and, indeed, he has a very fine idea: nothing less than to create a network of steam communication from isle to isle; in time it will make them quite a sea-confederation. Theodore has great talent at combination. Would you like to be in it, anybody? Well, I will tell you all about it, then, when I hear more. Theo will come over before he goes back to the Pacific. I fancy the scheme will interest Io. If it would only help him! Alas! yes, he has spent so much maintaining all those foreign navvies and shipwrights; nobody else would have done it; but he has such a noble sense of honour, and is always ready to sacrifice himself. Poor Io! Really, if my husband did not restrain him a little he would ruin himself in a week. Mr. Challoner is always very generous, too, but he is more practical than poor Io. Wouldn't you like to see those coral islands and all the dear primitive, unsophisticated, childlike people? I should."

And she spoke thus in many different ways, in many suitable places, being a woman who always had the right regard for appearances, and knowing that when a vulture soars away with prey in its talons it should always look like an eagle—or a guardian angel—if possible.

When many people were around them, she would jest and jeer at him.

"Io?" she would cry. "Oh, Io is to be made immortal in the Paris Salon, so they say. What a fine thing for him that he should have charmed a Muse! Look at him: he is quite ashamed of all his glories. He is quite thankless, you see. Do you go to Etoile's atelier? No? She lets no one in, they say; is that true? Well, I suppose she has her reasons. But they tell me if you do go you will see Io as Sordello—Io in all kinds of studies and of casts. What it is to be enamoured of him! It must be quite delightful to be so much in love. I wish I could be, but I never was."

And then she would laugh frankly and show her handsome teeth.

"Poor Io does not like it—man's ingratitude! We call him Sordello; it plagues him so; he works himself into quite a rage when I chaff him about his conquest."

Then, with a touching regret and modesty, she would change her tone and lower her voice and say:

"It is most painful, really, to us. We never thought we were preparing such distressing scenes for him when we asked her here; he is so gentle and so trustful, one is always afraid he may fall into her hands at last. Oh, no, we never see her. My husband would not allow me; of course one always concedes a great deal to genius. But still—and, after all, who knows if it be genius? Some say it is only borrowed plumes. Yes, I am very sorry that she came to Rome."

Then she would take her mourning crape out of the throng of matrons and spinsters to whom she had thus spoken, and go away with a candid, cheerful smile, pointing to Ioris standing aloof:—

"Look at 'Sordello!' How pensive he is, and how bored he looks! He must feel all the conspicuous unpleasantness of being a celebrity—vicariously! Do go to her atelier and see if you can see the picture. But I believe she won't let you in; she has grown quite *sauvage*, they say. What a thing it is to have a grand passion! Especially an unreturned one."

And she laughed so cheerily and contemptuously that Society never noticed that she drew the man she laughed at after her black skirts, and took him home with her.

"Very well done, very well done indeed; a little overdone, perhaps, a little over-acted, but clever, undeniably clever," said Lady Cardiff, hearing and watching the same sort of speech and the same sort of sneer half a score of times in as many different houses. But Society was not as clear-sighted; Society thought that Lady Joan was always outspoken and frank, and was very naturally and very properly impatient of foolish sentiments to which she was herself too wise to stoop; and Mr. Silverly Bell murmured, with a sigh, as he shook his head:—

"A woman that is all *mind* cannot understand the vagaries of unjustifiable passions. Talk to Joan Challoner of love! she does not know what you mean, not she! She is all mind."

Thus she was not idle, nor were her echoes idle either, in this tedious time of enforced seclusion, when she could trail her skirts through no cotillons and launch her cascade of confetti from no Carnival break, but could only go decorously to clergymen's breakfasts and spinsters' tea-fights, and could only solace herself at home with guitar and cigars, with private purchases and public companies, with Fiordelisa and friendship.

"Some one should tell Etoile," said Lady Cardiff to Vera von Regenwalde.

"Tell Etoile? Who should tell her? We have not her confidence; we do not even know what she and Ioris are, or are not, to one another."

"Some one should tell her," said Lady Cardiff, having for the fiftieth time heard the scoff and the sneer and the slander of Etoile's enemy.

"It would be very difficult," said Princess Vera,

"Difficult, perhaps, and I never meddle. Yet it is infamous that she should be jeered at by that black-browed audacity and not know it. It is true she tells us nothing, but I am sure that Ioris has entangled her without disentangling himself. It is what I foresaw he would do. It is of no use regretting, but it is melancholy. It is always women like that who suffer. Those people with fine brains and with generous souls will never learn that life is after all only a game—a game which will go to the shrewdest player and the coolest. They never see this; not they; they are caught on the edge of great passions, and swept away by them. They cling to their affections like commanders to sinking ships, and go down with them. They put their whole heart into the hands of others, who only laugh and wring out their lifeblood. They take all things too vitally in earnest. Life is to them a wonderful, passionate, pathetic, terrible thing that the gods of love and of death shape for them. They do not see that coolness and craft, and the tact to seize accident, and the wariness to obtain advantage, do in reality far more in hewing out a successful future than all the gods of Greek or Gentile. They are very unwise. It is of no use to break their hearts for the world; they will not change it. *Le culte de l'humanité* is the one of all others which will leave despair as its harvest. Laugh like Rabelais, smile like Montaigne; that is the way to take the world. It only puts to death its Sebastians, and makes its Shelleys not sorrowful to see the boat is filling."

"The boat shall not fill for her if I can help it," said Princess Vera. "I will try and tell her something."

CHAPTER XLVII.

IORIS left their house that day, after the discussion on the coral and the *ninfea*, and went home to his own.

Her portrait looked no longer on him from the wall; he had removed it, giving her as the pretext that to have it hung there hurt her good name. In its stead hung a brown saint on a gold ground of some old tender and sombre Umbrian painter.

But he always looked up to the place on the wall, and felt the fierce eyes upon him, though they were there no more.

The golden balls on the orange boughs swayed against the open casement; there was a soft blue sky such as Raffaele loved; birds were singing. Spring had come.

He sat down and leaned his head on his arms. He felt ashamed and contrite, stung with remorse and conscious of cowardice; weighed down, too, beneath a burden of obligation and of irrevocable errors. A shudder ran through him; he felt exhausted with a sickly sense of fatigue.

He knew very well that he was ruined, or would be so in a very little space. It unnerved him, and kept him mute and irresolute. It is easy to deride riches, but they give us a supreme ease and force which without them are hard to attain. To hear her parcelling out the years to come, seizing and mortgaging his future, made him feel as the garrotted slave may have felt when, bound and helpless, he heard Nero and Locusta talk before him of how they would torture his living body, and of when and where.

There were masses of unopened correspondence before him; he turned from them with reluctance and aversion; at this hour he was wont to be with Etoile, his hand ruffling the hair above her brows, his eyes watching her with a smile.

In the pain and depression of the moment his heart almost hardened against her.

"She should not have listened to me," he thought, with love's captious ingratitude. "I am not what she thinks me; I never shall be."

Why had he not left the Muse aloof in the coldness of art? Why had he brought her mortal pains and joys? His conscience reproached him, and his remorse made him capricious and unjust.

"Why did she trust me, why does she place her faith in me?" he thought. "If she only knew me as I am ——!"

And then all his heart went out to her in an ineffable tenderness.

He thought of all he had seen and heard in Paris, of her works and the strength that was in them, and the many talents that the world wondered at, and the grace and the colour of all things that she did, and the coldness that men blamed in her, hurt by her neglect; and to him she was timid as the doe; at a word he could make her heart flutter in her breast; against him she had no more strength than has a flower in the hand that holds it.

Yet almost he wished he had never loved her, nor she him.

Suddenly the door of his chamber opened, and in the ruddy glow of the light from the setting sun he saw her.

He rose appalled by the look on her face, and knowing that to bring her to his house there must have been some great and sudden cause at work.

Her hair was ruffled above her eyes that were dark and wet; her lips were very pale. She came hurriedly towards him; her hands trembled as they touched him.

"I have come; perhaps I have done wrong; I could not wait for your coming to me. They make a by-word of my name in that house of hers, I hear, and they say you stand by silent. Is it true? It cannot be true. You are not a coward."

His conscience made the word smite like a sword; he grew as pale as she.

"Is this your faith?" he said in evasion, and he put her hands away as if in anger.

"It cannot be true," she murmured. "In society I hear (it is a common jest) that she says foul things of me, and that you listen; that you let her speak ill of me; that you deny—deny——"

"Deny what?"

"What we are to one another."

"No one knows what we are to one another; is it not the charm of our love? Who has said this thing to you?"

"A woman who is my friend, yours too; she has heard it some time; at last she told me. My beloved—it is not true?"

"What is not true?" said Ioris with impatience and confusion. "I cannot understand what you mean. Where have your beautiful calmness and lucidity gone? It is unlike you to tilt at windmills, to split straws."

"I do not. But can it be true that you—you!—let *her* calumniate *me*?"

He moved angrily and looked away at the sun setting behind his orange trees.

His conscience stung him bitterly, and he took refuge in affected indignation and sternness.

"How should I know what she says or what she does? What is her house more than any other house? I was never her keeper."

Her lips parted; she would have spoken, but he saw his advantage in his anger, and so pursued it.

"Is this your trust in me? A moment's idle gossip from some fool, and you believe me capable of any baseness."

"You swore to me not to go to her, yet you were with her in Paris."

She spoke very low, under her breath, but the unmeant reproach struck him like a scourge.

"I was with her in Paris. Yes. I avowed it to you, I myself; I told you I had sinned, and you forgave the sin. What is forgiveness worth if its ghost rise in reproach like this? You have said I am a coward——"

"I said you were not."

"You said it so as to mean I was one. What has come to you, whom have you been hearkening to? Is it you who speak of me with strangers, with dolts, and idiots and slanderers? *You?* Can I help what is said in her house? She hates you because I love you. Can you complain of that? She has a bitter tongue, and is a bitter foe; I told you so long since. I cannot help her saying what she chooses. In Paris I struck two men because they spoke of you too lightly; I cannot strike her: she is a woman. A woman unsexed, if you will, but still a woman; she must say what she will."

"But you must leave her."

She spoke very low, but her voice was firm; her eyes shone through their mist with a strong, steadfast light.

"You live in solitude until you dream these things. You are too much alone," he said, with that manlike inconsistency which turns the obedience it has commanded into a fault and makes of it a reproach. "Why do you not go into the world as you did when I met you? It would be better—wiser far. It would keep you from these brooding fancies."

"When you are not with me I am best alone," she answered him; "you know that so well. Besides—besides, I cannot risk seeing you beside her; I could not bear it."

He looked past her out to where the golden fruit of his garden hung in the dusky light.

"What folly!" he said uneasily. "You are everything to me, she is nothing. Is not that enough?"

"The world thinks me nothing. It thinks her everything!"

"You are perverse," said her lover irritably, and his colour changed.

"I have left her in every sense that you can mean. Do you think—can you think—for one moment that you need be jealous of her?"

"Jealous!"

She echoed the word in an infinite scorn. It seemed to lower her to the level of the woman they spoke of, to sink her all at once to the intrigues and baseness of low thoughts and of gross passions. Jealous!—she!—who had found him in his captivity and learned from him to disdain the tyrant who chained him in it!

"I do not think that I am jealous," she said coldly. "That is not the word to use between us. Can I be jealous of what so long ago you told me was a weariness and a shame to you? No, it is not that."

"It is that," he said, with a passing amusement in her pain. "Yes. You are jealous, my proud one. But you need not be. I cannot break with her, just yet, entirely—as a friend, I mean—not yet, because of all the meshes that hold me, all that she knows of, all we are embarked in—I have told you so. As for her calumny, how can I tell what she may say? She speaks in her own tongue; it passes me as the wind does. What spirit has changed you that you become like other women, all at once, and stoop to their low level and listen to the chatter of the world? I thought you never would have wronged me so. It is not worthy of you, What, you, my Muse, a listener to babbling, drivelling rumour-mongers! Oh, for shame!"

A faint smile came on her face; she looked at him, and all her love was in the look.

"Dear, if you give your word it is enough for me."

His eyes did not meet hers.

"I have given it. Let it be enough."

A spasm of doubt ached through her heart, but she was silent.

"Forgive me," she murmured, after a pause. "I did not think, indeed, that you could hear any ill of me and be mute—and ill from her!—but yet the mere thought hurt me so. Forgive me that I did you any wrong."

"I forgive," he murmured—he who had done the wrong—and kissed her.

For the first time she shrank a little from him.

"Wait," she said wearily. "Does she not know the truth yet?"

"No. I never speak of you; it is best so—yet—for a little longer."

"It is always—a little longer."

"Were I not half-ruined, it should be to-night."

"How can she help or hinder you?"

"The woman that is forsaken is an enemy: she will be the bitterest the world ever saw."

Etoile raised herself and looked at him once more. She was still very pale.

"But you will forbid her to go to Fiordelisa? That at least—for me."

He was silent.

A certain resolve and imperious will, that he had never seen there, which if he had seen it oftener might have saved himself and her, came on her face as she gazed at him.

"You will keep her from Fiordelisa, if you love me—now."

"I will. That I swear to you."

He spoke hastily, but he spoke with resolution.

Then, having his word, she went away from his house which she scarcely ever entered, and in which she always stayed unwillingly, because it seemed to her, like Fiordelisa, desecrated and usurped by the memory of a dead base passion.

When she passed out into the red evening light two dusky figures were hastening by on the other side of the street; they were the sisters from the Forum Trajani.

"There are her watchdogs," he muttered. "They have seen you. You should not have come. I should have been with you ere the sun set."

He bowed to her ceremoniously, standing with uncovered head. Her horses bore her away through the red glow towards her home.

The watchdog hurried to the Casa Challoner.

"I have proof positive, dearest, now!" that admirable creature cried. "She came out of his house—*out of it*—we both saw her—five minutes since!"

The eyes of the Lady Joan grew cold.

"I know it, dear," she answered tranquilly. "She is always going to his house. What can Io do more than show her out again? He is a gentleman and too gentle-hearted, else he might do something rougher."

"But it is disgraceful!"

"Oh, yes; but what can one expect?"

"It is disgraceful!"

And the watchdog's back was up and its teeth set—in the interests of morality, of course; nothing more.

Lady Joan smiled still, coldly.

"Poor Io! he *would* think a Paris Corinna a Tenth Muse, and an innocent recreation, and he gets his punishment! It is really hard on him though to be so persecuted, just because he made himself a little pleasant in my house to a stranger. You know Io's pretty manner, dear; you know it means nothing."

Marjory did know—had known, to her cost. She sighed a little, and was silent.

"Will you not speak to him?" she said hesitatingly. "It is really so disgraceful!"

Lady Joan laughed outright.

"Speak to him? Not I! What is it to me? It serves him right; he would play with edged tools. All that matters to you and me, dear, is not to know Etoile; and we don't know her. Let Io take care of himself; if he have got into any trouble through imprudence."

Then she went out into society, and said much the same thing—more cautiously, or more slightly, as her prudence told her was best. She did not go out very much, being still ostensibly in deep grief, but she saw a very large number of persons, and to most of them contrived to say, "Etoile? Oh, yes, I don't know her this winter—I do not like to know her, you see, after all my poor father told me. Great genius? Oh, yes! that, of course, though it is odd she paints nothing here. But I believe she is in love with our poor friend Ioris—yes, Ioris, that you so often see about our house—she took a fancy to him, meeting him two or three times, and has left him no peace ever since. We laugh at him very much. It makes him so angry, because really he never thought twice about her. But artists are always like that."

So she would say, with a broad smile and a frank laugh, a hundred times a week, and going homeward, casting off her mask, would lock herself in her own chamber, and weep, and rave, and moan in all the fury and the feebleness of a woman that knows herself betrayed and forsaken.

But she was stubbornly brave and coldly wise. The fit over, the storm passed; she picked up the mask and put it on again; and when she saw Ioris still met him as though she knew nothing, and was full of eagerness and news about the brood mares at Fiordelisa and the coral of the South Sea Isles.

Meanwhile Etoile paced up and down her old grey terraces under the evening skies with a bitter sense of humiliation and of bewilderment; though passion had bound its bands upon her eyes and kept them so long closed, she had seen prevarication and trouble upon his face as he had listened to her, and had not seen the frank, firm indignation of a man wrongfully accused.

For calumny she cared nothing.

It was like a hot wind, bringing sand and pestilence, no doubt, but she had never heeded it; she had kept the doors of the house of her life closed against it, and had always thought that it had only power to harm the feeble. But calumny that he had stood by and heard!—that hurt her like a blow; nor for itself, but to think that he could let it pass unpunished, that he could let the woman he despised utter it unrebuked.

A sudden consciousness fell on her with a heavy weight of pain that all unwillingly she had failed to loosen the bands about his fate, and had only bound the chains about her own; failed, as high natures and dreamful lives so often fail where the harder, shrewder, meaner temper aims aright, and conquers.

She looked at her canvas and her marble and smiled very wearily.

"Any fool had been wiser than I!" she thought, and her heart ached with sad derision of itself.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

BETWEEN them from that day there fell a certain shadow of restraint.

It began—

"That drifting slow apart,
All unresisted, unrestrained,
Which comes to some when they have gained
The dear endeavour of their soul
As two light skiffs that sailed together,
Through days and nights of tranquil weather,
Adown some inland stream might be
Drifted asunder each from each,
When, floating with the tide, they reach
The hoped-for end, the promised goal,
The sudden glory of the sea."

In him the consciousness of error was a daily burden; into her the anguish of doubt had entered like an injected poison. When they met there was a name they could not speak; a memory they strove in vain to exorcise. Uneasily he affected a serenity he could not command; vainly she tried to show a faith she could not feel. The restlessness of conscious disloyalty was in him; the restlessness of perpetual apprehension was with her. The infinite charm of perfect freedom and of perfect faith was gone. He knew that he was not wholly true, and she feared it.

"I am a coward in her eyes!" he thought; and the thought stung him because of the truth there was in it; and he felt angered against her because she had been courageous always, and could not comprehend the hesitations and vacillations of his nature which unnerved him and kept him halting and mute before his tyrant. To say the truth simply because the truth it was, seemed to her so easy, and to him so hard.

"You do not understand," he would say to her irritably; and she would be silent, wishing not to wound him; and so "the rift within the lute" was made, and its music became mute.

Circe brewed her simples and changed men into swine. His destroyer was no sorceress, but she had a brutalising and enervating power, as every grosser nature has when once it fastens on what is at once loftier, yet weaker, than itself.

He would leave Etoile vowing to himself to see his tyrant no more, to let her take lands, and repute, and everything she chose from him, but to force her to leave him free. Then that all-pervading, all-destroying influence that was in his life, as the smell of the camphor-wood in the chamber, would seek him out, and environ him, and emasculate him, and he would be once more untrue to his fairest faith, and once more heartsick of himself and of the woman who mastered him, and ashamed before himself and before the woman that he loved.

"She shall never go to my home again"—so he had vowed; yet as the spring stole on and the old ways were trodden by her with sure feet, and she laughed and talked of Fiordelisa and the summer and the future, his nerves seemed paralysed; he kept silent.

What more did she want? Nothing.

Silence gives consent.

Feebler women would have read his aversion in his glance, known his desire from his absence, understood his reluctance from his silence, but she cared for none of these things. She knew all that they meant, but she had shaped her course and abided by it. Long before, hanging her cashmere in his entrance-hall, she had resolved to stay there for ever and aye. Should so mere a reed as his own wish combat the stubborn steel of her will? Never!

He was silent, and she took her course.

Great is the power of stubbornness, and greater yet that of violence.

Love shall fail, honour shall droop, manliness shall cower, dignity and uprightness shall perish, but these powers shall endure and conquer; the powers of the brazen brow and of the brazen tongue.

"You are above me; why did you ever stoop to me?" he muttered once to Etoile, and felt the thing he said.

He hated the lower life, the grosser aims, the coarser thoughts, the looser creeds, of the other life that had been so long by his; and yet the higher in its turn oppressed and troubled him.

"You are like the edelweiss: one must climb so high to grasp you," he said, smiling; yet though he smiled he felt a sense of strain upon him, and of an atmosphere too clear for eyes long used to the mistier air of lower levels.

In the first hours of all passion there is a supreme exaltation which sustains and intoxicates; but, these hours passed, the

force of habit and of old association reassert themselves, and, if they be of gross fibre, will draw grossly downward the nature which temporarily escaped them.

With Etoile he had been happier than he had ever been in all his years; but had she been a lower woman than she was, she would have kept him more constant, more content, and, measuring the forces against her better, would better have defeated them.

As it was she loved him, gave all to him, trusted him, and lost him—perhaps by her own fault. She thought it her own fault always. Who does not that loves?

Once more the flowers grew thick in the grassy ways; the grape-blossom was once more on the vine, and once more the Campagna was a tossing sea of flowers, with white acacia for the foam. Shut in her gardens of Rocaldi, Etoile left the world to say of her what it might, what it would; and in the warmth and the oppression of the city her rival, warier, wiser, colder, and more cautious, smiled on the world and said:—

“I shall soon be at Fiordelisa; my husband is so fond of Fiordelisa: we all are. Yes, I have saved it for poor Io—really I may say I have saved it. It is so pleasant to be of use to a friend.”

The world cast a stone at the shut gates of Rocaldi; it nodded cheerfully to the open gates of Fiordelisa. The world does not like to be ignored; and it never forgives a closed door. Lady Joan knew that well, and she threw her doors open.

“Look how frank and careless she is! As if there could be any sin in a woman so candid as that!” said the world in return for her concession; but of Etoile, aloof, indifferent, going by with mute disdain and absent thoughts, it was willing to believe any evil. Why not? She did nothing to amuse it; she did not even pay it the compliment of fear.

Meanwhile, as the keen grey eyes of his tyrant flashed in the eyes of that yet harder tyrant, the world, and her clear, ringing, rough tones cried twenty times a day to Society, “We are going to Fiordelisa—yes!—you must all come to Fiordelisa,” the heart of Ioris as he heard sank as a stone sinks under the waves.

At any hesitation, any anxiety, any interrogation from her, he would have hurled the truth at her and have let her do her worst; but in the cool assumption of right as a matter of course there lies an irresistible power; it makes a conqueror of the mortal, as of the nation, that knows aright all its force.

She never gave him the chance of any moment of doubt in her own perfect title; she spoke, she wrote, she worked, she schemed, she planned, she prophesied, sweeping all the future into the measure of her sight, as one conscious of a kingdom that no enemy could invade nor any accident diminish.

In its small way it was an almost superb insolence of possession; in her own heart she was on fire with rage, thrilled through and through with dread, and knew that any instant her throne might fall and her exile might begin, but she never let one sign of this knowledge ever escape her.

Hour on hour, day after day, she smiled steadily at him, and at the world, and said :—

“Fiordelisa! dear Fiordelisa! yes, we are going there. We think we shall winter there; we mean to live and die there. It is a dear old place.”

“She knew all that he did, every hour that he spent elsewhere, every letter that was written to him; she found means to know everything, being once on the track of his infidelity; but no single sign of all she knew ever escaped her; she had even self-command enough to hold her peace and never reproach him for his absence, never upbraid him for his coldness, but go on steadily in her old ways, with her scales and her stud-book, her ledgers and her steam-engines, her noisy economies and her showy extravagances.

Love? She knew its feebleness well. It will burst through a tempest and break down a wall of ice, but against the dull, impenetrable, common-place sand-heap of a changeless routine it falls back powerless as the lofty, impetuous waves of the sea fall back from the massed earth of a level dyke.

The waves fret themselves in vain: the dyke conquers.

In her own strange way she still loved him; in her own sullen way she now hated him; but hate and love both subsided before her resolve to keep her hold on his life and on Fiordelisa. Besides, it was a form of vengeance: the widest and the heaviest vengeance she could take; and even in her fury she was shrewd and wise.

So the oxen began to drag the household gods once more towards the old grey walls on the hillside, and once more she began to prepare for her summer sojourn; and Ioris, hearing and knowing, felt his heart stand still as he remembered that he had sworn that no more should she ever dwell under his dead mother's desecrated roof.

“That at least, if you love me!” had said Etoile. And he loved her; yet he stood by and saw the oxen go, the exodus begin.

“My wife!” he murmured to Etoile, still with his arms about her, when once more the nightingales began their song; and in all honesty he meant still to vindicate her honour to the world, and give her all he had to give in answer for her sacrifice to him of peace, and fame, and use, and art.

But meanwhile the wife of another pursued her shameless and guilty way, and went across his threshold and sat by his

hearth, and laughed, and claimed his future. And the courage was lacking in him that was needed to thrust her from his doors; and the courage was also lacking in him to lift up before the world as his nearest and dearest the life that through him the world had calumniated.

For the courage thus needed was of another fibre than that which faces the duel and fears no battle.

Though there were many times when he longed to let the world know how he, and he alone, had had power to "break the nautilus shell" and make a captive of what other men had found beyond their reach, there were other times when the base, noxious vapours of slander found their way to him and stifled his higher resolves. He never doubted that they were more than vapour; but he knew that such vapour is the world's breath, and he had not courage to thrust his hand down the dragon's throat and tear out its pestilential tongue.

The triumph of being beloved by a woman whom the world had crowned, was precious to him; but the courage of being true to a woman whom the world also slandered, was not in his nature.

Morning, noon, and night, wherever he went, wherever he moved, wherever a group was gathered together, or a dispute of voices fell on his ear, she whose interest it was to divorce him from Etoile contrived, with her many echoes, that he should perpetually hear some innuendo, some falsehood, some foulness set afloat by her, and living the lusty life that a lie does live in common with other blatant poisonous things. He knew that lies they were, and yet he recoiled from meeting them with an open scorn, a fierce denial. His love had always been rather triumph than tenderness. Love that is chiefly triumph is usually captious and exacting, and apt to quarrel with the very food it craves.

So he hesitated, so he waited, so he trusted to chance to cut the knots into which his fate had entangled itself, and he forgot that chance only favours those strong enough to compel it. And meantime he let the bronzed, frank face of his destroyer smile up to his, and let her fierce voice cry unchallenged:—

"We go to Fiordelisa!"

He did not mean to let her go; with the hand of Etoile in his he dreamed of another life for his old home; but meantime the moments and the hours and the days slipped away, and he only reached a double infidelity, a dual treason, and began to turn uneasily from the clear gaze of the eyes he had kissed into blindness. Perhaps no crime, no sin, no fault, no folly, brings so much woe as does the one terrible error of irresolution.

It is an acid that eats away all the gold of life, imperceptibly but surely, till we are left with empty hands, quite beggared; and only know our loss when to know it is all too late.

Ioris stood irresolute, with strong force of desire but no strong force of action, wishing, waiting, playing with his fate; and fate fell on him and crushed him, as it always crushes those who do not seize and make it bless them.

Then came one hot and sickly day, when, though it was in springtime, there were dearth and sickness in the heavy grey-ness of the air.

Etoile stood alone in her studio.

The Sordello remained still incomplete, but pure and brilliant in its colour, as though it had been conceived in Venice in days of the Republic and the Renaissance. There were other studies; there were casts in clay; there was a head in marble—they all had the same features.

"My beloved, you have made me a woman, but you have killed me as an artist," she said half-aloud as she looked on them, too true an artist not to know her loss, and that her art was now not vision but only remembrance.

Her eyes were wet as she looked.

The loss of the power of fancy to the artist, is like the loss of its wings to the bird.

She walked restlessly to and fro the stones of the floor.

Once—was it yesterday, or was it a score of years away?—she had flown to her work, when the day broke, with such strong joy in it that she never felt physical fatigue or solitude or any flight of time. Now—she only listened for one step. When she heard it not, the long, pale, weary day seemed cold as death, empty as a rifled grave.

This day he had not come; it had passed and gone without one moment that recorded joy or use: she was ashamed at her own apathy and feebleness, but they were stronger than she: she could not strive against them; she felt an unspeakable depression and foreboding that deepened as the days wore on. Why would he not speak? Why would he not be true? Together they were happy—yes; but behind them, like a sullen shadow, always stood the memory of that fierce and furious passion that was betrayed.

"If *I* told her the truth?" she thought; and then her heart misgave her, and she was afraid the mere thought had been disloyal to him, as if doubtful of his good faith.

It was not for her to speak when he kept silent; and yet—

She felt humiliated and stung with a sense of outrage, to think that he would not rise and say of herself, "This is where my love lies now, and all my trust and honour."

Now and then, seeing far off in a street crowd or at a chamber window the face of her foe, she had felt a sickening thrill of pain; not jealousy, as he thought; not jealousy; who can be jealous of what they know is scorned?—but some such

impetuous hatred and disgust that she would have felt at seeing a snake wind up about his limbs, and she, herself, doomed to look on the while, and powerless to stir.

He did not understand that; he only thought her jealous. Men see but a little way into the hearts of women.

When he sat at her feet, and leaned his head on her knees, he thought he understood her, because he did only too fatally understand that he was the master of her life, the single thought of her entire existence; but he did not understand her aright, because he thought the feeling which moved her against her foe was the mere restless jealousy of her sex, whereas it was the far deeper, and far more noble, hatred of the nature that was true and bold for the nature that was false and base.

"If she had ever loved you truly *once* I could have forgiven her from my heart, even if she had killed me," she had said to him.

He had smiled and kissed her, but he had not understood.

He had thought it a mere pretty poetic exaggeration of words. He had said to himself that no women ever forgive each other to whom the same lover is dear.

This day he did not come; the morrow passed, and he was still absent. It was grey, heavy, sickly weather, that not even the outburst of blossom and flower could beautify. She counted the hours till her heart grew sick.

The nightingales began their earliest notes in the palms at evening; she closed the casements against the song; she could not bear to hear it—alone. It seemed to her that the time grew very long, that his silence lasted till it became dishonour to them both.

"If I were to tell her?" she thought again and again; and still the thought seemed to her to be a base one, to be like a betrayal of him; and she rejected it, and felt ashamed of it.

Another day came and there was no word of him. She wrote, and then tore up all she wrote, being unwilling to seem to imitate the exactions and the persecutions of her rival. With her he should be always free.

She would not cage her nightingale.

The sun was low and red, the air was dull; she walked through the blue flag lilies that once more filled the grass, and her heart was sick with foreboding.

It seemed to her that any fool would have been wiser than she had been.

He was not changed; when with her he was passionate and tender as when the blue lilies had bloomed in the year before, but she had learned that cruel truth which all women who themselves love greatly do learn, that a victorious love is not as eager nor as suppliant as a love that hopes yet fears.

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very strong.

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that flash the wo

The message
an accident, been burned to the ground; nothing saved from it but
her own bust by Clesinger; and, since misfortunes never come
alone, there were other tidings that a man of business in
Belgium who had conducted her affairs had robbed her and
fled.

Her first thought was of Ioris.

"Will he mind very much?" she thought. It made her
much poorer. She stood awhile with the message in her hand,
thinking always of him.

Her old treasures had been dear to her, and the things of
her art dearer still, and the place had been full of them, but it
was only of him that she thought. She awoke as from a trance
and saw the servant waiting there.

"Tell them to get the horses," she said quickly. It was
evening; in ten minutes more it would be night. She threw
some black laces around her head, and when the horses were
ready drove down into Rome.

It was already dark.

To tell her lover was her first impulse; to do what he
thought best; also not to let him for one moment deem her
richer than she was.

A woman who is the mistress of a great fame is never alto-
gether poor; but she had lost much that she had saved; she had
little left save the power of her hand.

The horses flew on through the dark, down into the heart of
Rome, to the banks of the river, where the lamps were all lit, and
lights were gliding to and fro on the bridges.

Ioris was not at his house.

She asked where he had gone—the first time that she had
ever asked a question respecting him. The man, who knew a
little and guessed more, and hated the woman for whom for

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a message—one of those brief messages
le in a few curt, bald words.

many years he had had to do so much unpaid service, threw his hands towards the stars and laughed.

"Where should he be, madama mia, but at the Casa Challoner? He came in with milady about five o'clock and they went out together."

Etoile said nothing; she leaned back on the cushions pale and cold; she felt as if the speaker had stabbed her.

"To the Casa Challoner," she said, in a cold, clear voice to her coachman.

The servant standing in the doorway heard and was frightened; the horses trotted onwards towards the Corso in the moonlight and gaslight and the deep shadows of Rome.

All memory of the losses that had befallen her faded out of her mind; all she was conscious of was that he was there—*there!*—with all his oaths forsworn.

A very sickness of disgust came on her; the fierce steel-like eyes, the smoke-tainted lips, the twanging guitar, the large firm hands, the loud rough laugh, all that he abhorred, rose before her, in imagination, till all her blood leaped to a scornful hatred she had never known; and the deep blue of the skies above her seemed to her full of fire. She had lost much, she had been robbed, half-ruined; what of that? She forgot it. She only remembered that her lover was faithless.

It was one of those moments for which the world blames women bitterly, yet for which they are not to blame, for in their pain they are scarce conscious what they do, and are driven on by sheer swift instincts that they have no power to control.

To go there, to find him there, to cast the truth down between them and see which he would cleave to, to fling at her foe all the scorn, all the disdain, all the knowledge kept down so long in silence—this one impulse alone governed her as she let her horses trot through the still night towards the Temple of the Virtues.

In the moonlight, before the doorway of the house, there were two waggons with teams of low grey oxen, and the waggons were piled high. There was a pause and some altercation, the waggons stopped the way.

"We are loading them with milady's boxes and other things," the servant of the house said to her coachman. "We all go up to Fiordelisa to-morrow. Does your mistress wish to call at this time of night? Well, I do not know; I can ask. There is nobody up there but the Prince Ioris."

Then the man laughed, as servants laugh at such things in Italy, and signed the oxen back, and went into the doorway.

"Drive away!" said Etoile; then she stopped her horses again in a by-street and descended from the carriage, and walked on alone under the stars.

The coarse laugh of the serving-man had checked the impulse

that had brought her to this place; she felt heart-sick with shame; he was there—he! her own, her idol, her treasure that outweighed the world;—he was there, at the feet of the woman he had renounced.

Even in that moment of bitterest anguish she did not deceive herself; she knew well that nothing that need move her to jealousy drove him there, but only the hesitation of temperament, the habit of dominion, the dread of a virago's rage. But all the courage of her own nature leaped up in scorn. He loved her, yet he had spent the starry hours of the early night in reluctant submission to the unholy bonds he had abjured, in cowardly counterfeit of a passion he had renounced, despised, and lived to loathe.

And her rival was to go to Fiordelisa!

The insult entered her very soul like iron.

She was to go to Fiordelisa, this woman whom he had forsaken and contemned; to live in his home, to be near him all the summer through, to reign there at her will! The outrage of it seemed to her past all endurance.

If the woman he had renounced were to be thus allowed to rule him, what was she herself? less than the very dust in his eyes, surely, or never would he thus insult her.

In the moment of that intense pain, that intense humiliation, Etoile lost her serenity, her patience, her long-suffering tenderness for him. She felt fooled and dishonoured. For the first time since she had felt his lips touch hers she thought of herself and not of him.

Such moments of profound self-abasement come to all who have loved too well. She had been proud and loyal and of infinite truthfulness and faith; she felt betrayed and stung beyond endurance.

She walked up and down in the clear moonlight that had succeeded to the grey and oppressive day. She had utterly forgotten the losses that had fallen on her. The dark and quiet corner where the house of her foe stood, was quite deserted now. The oxen had gone away, and their loads with them. The arched doors stood open. The porter had also gone down the street. The lamps gleamed in the entrance. The casements above were all lighted; there came from them the echo of a guitar and the sound of a voice humming amorous songs of the populace.

Etoile stood in the moonlight, without, by the open doors and hesitated. If she were to find them together, and fling the truth down between them like a gauntlet? . . . Would it be freedom for him; or would it be merely vengeance, a vulgar vengeance, worthy of her foe, and not of her?

She stood by the door in the shadow, swayed now by one impulse, and now by another; yielding at one moment to the

natural, common instinct of a passion that was wronged, restrained at the other by the higher temper of a love that shrank from base contention of its rights.

The night was very still; there was no one near; above the steep overhanging walls the stars shone. On the stillness the thrum and thrill of the guitar struck clearly from the chambers above; then even that ceased. On the silence she heard a little laugh, and then a murmuring voice; the laugh was her rival's; the voice was his.

She shuddered and moved from the threshold, and felt defamed, and dishonoured.

He could laugh there;—he! who had said to her, “Make me what you think me, what you wish me;—I am yours!”

She walked up and down the stones of the little square before the doors that still stood open, yet she did not enter: it seemed to her so vile, so poor a thing to do; the house was cursed, the very air of it was hateful; she, who had all right and title of a great and loyal love, could not stoop to dispute him, as an avaricious wanton disputes her prey. Yet she could not tear herself from the place. The very silence that had followed on the song and the laugh enthralled her with a horrible sorcery.

He was there—faithless to both.

Eleven o'clock struck; the hours had fled uncounted by her. Her horses waited out of sight; the shadow of some passer-by fell now and then across the white breadths of the moonlight; she did not notice it, nor hear the step.

A heavy sense of bitter humiliation oppressed her, and under it burned the smouldering fires of her scorn. She wandered and waited there alone, as though she were the guilty wife, the wanton paramour; and above, laughing and singing, was that craven sin the world forgave as friendship!—a sin so craven, that not even to itself could it be true.

She did not reason; she only felt heart-sick, outraged, indignant, humbled, stung to a delirious pain.

Suddenly in the stillness there came the jarring sound of a closing door: she was near the house; out of it she saw Ioris pass into the moonlight.

The porter, returning hastily from his wineshop, hurried in and drew the bolts and bars for the night's safety; Ioris came leisurely forward along the pavement, in the shadow of the walls; then he saw her, and paused, with a cry, half of pleasure, half of anger.

“Dear, what has happened?” he murmured hurriedly, and cast a glance around, and saw that there was no one near, and would have taken her hands; but she thrust him quickly from her, and gazed up in his face, the whiteness of her skirts trailing on the dusty stones, the stars shining above them.

"Is this how you keep faith to me?" she said, and her voice was very low.

His face changed; he took refuge in anger.

"Is this how you watch me? what are you doing here, alone, at such an hour? Are you waiting for me? I will not have you wait so."

"You let her go to your home, to-morrow?"

He was silent.

"You let her go? Is it true?"

He made no answer; he was very pale; he strove to take her hands again.

"You are excited and angry; you are unlike yourself; how do you come in the streets at such an hour? where are your servants? Do you do it to watch me? I will not be watched; I have had enough of that elsewhere, and too much. Why are you here? Answer me. I do not understand; I will not be watched. If you want to upbraid me——"

He spoke with all the petulance, the offended waywardness, that took a grace in him like that of a spoiled proud child; he was stung by his own conscience, and impatient that he had been seen where all the manhood in him told him that it was against all manliness to go.

"I would not upbraid you," said Etoile, her voice still very low and broken. "Come a little farther—farther from that house."

He walked beside her down the shadow of the street, till they were in the white breadth of the moon-rays once more.

"Are you going to lay in wait for me any night that I am not with you?" he said, with a sombre irritation, more affected than real; "I fancied I was free from such things as that, with you; you have said you trust me; what is trust, if it doubt every act, if it measure every moment. I have had too much of this from another."

"Have you had too much, since you still go to that other?"

"Oh, you would reproach me! you are like other women after all; after all you are no higher than they are; you suspect; you accuse."

"I suspect nothing; I see you coming from her house; you cannot deny that she is to live in your own home, even now after your promise?"

"I made no promise,"

"No promise!"

He was silent, the colour faded from his face.

"I asked you for patience," he muttered a little later, "I asked you to trust me and to wait; yes, I promised; but one is not master of one's self. She is nothing to me: cannot that content you?"

"No!"

She threw the laces off her head, and the moon-rays shone in her wet eyes as they gazed into his.

"Dear, I am tired! are you angry? cannot you understand? I am not of marble or of clay; I am only a woman that loves you, and that you love. How can I bear it day after day, to know myself first with you, yet live as though I were nothing to you before the world, and see you in the world's sight pass as hers? Oh, my love! my love! I have had patience, I have kept silence, till my heart is half broken; do you know anything of what I suffer, when I see you by her, when I hear your voice in her chamber, as I heard to-night? Do you know? I think you cannot. It is not that I am jealous as you think, it is that I am ashamed."

"*You* ashamed!" he muttered, and his pale cheek grew red.

"Yes, I am ashamed! ashamed of my own feebleness, of my own lack of power, of my own incompetency to save you from the lower life that holds you. Ah, you cannot understand! What use are fame, and praise and power: I have to give place to *her*!"

All the immeasurable scorn that there was in her launched itself out in that one word.

He moved uneasily, and looked away.

"You do not know what you say," he muttered. "You are feverish and agitated; let us go from here. To-morrow——"

"To-morrow she goes to Fiordelisa."

He was silent.

"Does she go to Fiordelisa?"

He was silent.

She laughed a laugh that chilled and terrified him, unlike any he had ever heard upon her lips.

"And you bewailed your slavery to me in almost the first hours that we met! What use was that, since you live on in it by choice; what use to wake my pity, to come to me and lament? . . . Who is blinded? who is betrayed? who is befooled? Is it she? or is it I? What have you meant of all that you have said? Was all your pain a falsehood?"

Every word entered his soul, as thorns into a wound; his conscience smote him bitterly, but for that very cause his anger rose.

"You insult me! perhaps I merit it. Who can know what to do, where two women claim every moment, and watch every word? I lead the life of a hound! Falsehood? yes, without liberty there is always falsehood. But you leave me no more freedom than she does."

"I leave you all freedom; are you not free to go to her?"

The blood beat in her temples, the stars swam before her

eyes; intense bitterness, intense humiliation, intense anguish, were all at war in her; she scarcely knew what she said.

"Are you not free to go to her?" she repeated, "free to drag my name through the dust for her diversion; free to let me be mocked and slandered by her, you silent all the while?"

"She never names you."

"That is untrue. She taunts me with an unanswered love, and you stand by and let the shameful lie be said."

"If you choose to believe the lies of others——"

Her unwonted passion broke into a low sob.

"Oh, my love, whom would I believe against you? Not all the world. But can you say to me on your honour that she knows the truth?"

"No," he said with a fierce roughness most uncommon in him, "No, she does not know the truth. I have not told her. I am a coward. You have been pleased to say so."

She made no answer.

She would have sooner heard him tell her she must die.

"It is the temple of lies," he said bitterly, with a backward gesture of contempt towards the house that stood in the gloom behind them. "I have lived amongst them till they are part of me. What does she know? She knows nothing. If she could tell that I had even kissed your lips she would kill me."

"Are you afraid?"

She turned and looked at him with a cold disdain that hurt him more than all her rival's wildest savagery of wrath.

"You insult me!" he said under his breath; and his eyes grew sombre and full of fire, but they wandered from her own.

Suddenly she took his hands and held them in her own against her breast.

"My beloved, I will ask your forgiveness for such insult on my knees if you will tell me, with your eyes on mine, that you will go back to that house now and tell her all. All!—before another hour goes."

She felt his heart beat quickly.

He looked on the ground and not at her.

"You are but a woman like the rest," he said with evasive irritation. "It is not my love you want; it is triumph over a rival."

She dropped his hands and turned away from him. After all the hours of their perfect love, was this all that he knew of her!

"Go to her," she said as she put him from her with a gesture. "Go to her: it is she who is fit mate for you—not I!"

The words severed them, as steel cuts the skein of life in twain for ever.

The moonlight fell between them in a chill, pale space of joyless light.

Not looking back once she went away from him into the shadow where her horses were waiting.

He stood like a man who has had a mortal blow, but keeps erect from pride.

He did not follow her.

Their lives were divided for ever, as the chill moonlight severed their shadows.

A casement above, a stone's throw off in the gloom, closed quietly, and behind it, in the darkness, another woman laughed to herself—well content.

All things come to those who know how to wait. She had only had to wait, in patience and darkness, without seeming to stir a hand, and the end she desired had come.

To hold without mercy, and to be deaf and blind to all that told her the truth: this had been her strength, and it had conquered.

With the morrow to Fiordelisa!

CHAPTER XLIX.

THAT night Etoile wrote the truth to her.

When she had told it, she wrote on:—

"You need fear me no more; he and I are parted, so you may listen to me for a moment. You are stronger than I; you have known how to keep him against his will, and how to ruin his strength and his peace and his fortunes; will you not have pity now? Pity on him. He does not love you; he was weary of you so long, long ago. When I met him first, his captivity was bitter and dreary to him; you must see this—if you would see it—in a hundred signs and ways. I now ask you to set him free. Not for me. I swear to you that we can never again be anything to one another, because there is the black pit of a cruel lie set like a gulf between him and me. I only ask you for his sake. What is the life you lead him? A life joyless, galling, jaded, unworthy of manhood, robbed of all effort and all hope. You hurt his honour, you stain his name, you make him a byword and a jest. You call this friendship—to the world. I tell you that it is the basest and most cruel passion that ever fed its vanity on the ruin of another soul. I have surrendered him, and I will never claim him if you will set him free—free to find purer faiths and happier ties than mine or yours; free to be able

to look his future in the face and feel it his own—not mine nor yours. What can I say to you? how can I move you? You are a base woman, and you have never loved him in any noble sense of love one hour; but, sacrifice me as you like, jest at me, jeer at me, drag my name in the dust, do anything you will of vengeance on me,—only set him free.”

The tears fell from her eyes and scorched and blurred the paper.

Then she tore it up and burnt it.

What use was it to cry to the dead wall, to beat the gates of brass? Sooner will the wall hear, sooner will the brass melt, than the heart of a cruel woman have pity.

CHAPTER L.

It is five o'clock on a summer afternoon at Fiordelisa.

In the old grey court there is the tinkle of teacups, the smell of cigar smoke, the sounds of a guitar; the red bignonia on the south wall is all aglow with blossom; the peacock is strutting amongst the long grass; the bees are humming above the strawberry flowers. Lady Joan is laughing and singing and thrumming the chords of the guitar: she is lying back on a low cane chair; she feels happy.

People have been lunching with her, a few good decorous people who are now strolling about in and out the cortile and gardens one with another; amidst them Mr. Silverly Bell is murmuring to Mrs. Maescrip:—

“Oh, yes: it is quite an old story now, but only too true, unfortunately, only too true.”

“What really? That she lay in wait for him after midnight?”

“Ah, quite true! and by dear Lady Joan’s house, too, making such a scandal! As if Lady Joan had anything—anything—of an incorrect interest in her friend.”

“Shameful!” echoes a chorus of the small gentilities and the free-born republicans, the consuls’ wives and the bankers’ daughters.

“And she tried to stab him, didn’t she, with a dagger out of her studio?” cries that sprightly lady, Mrs. Henry V. Clams, plucking some heliotrope.

Mr. Silverly Bell sighs and is pained.

“Oh, no, that is exaggerated—at least I trust it is exaggerated.

Ioris is such a gentleman, *he* never says a word; it is difficult to know the truth, but some people were passing and saw, it seems; . . . it is very painful. I used to like her, I really did at one time like her. Yes! she has a charm of manner; yes, until one knows. . . . But no character, you know, and no capital! . . . I believe she has had great losses; that she wanted Ioris that night to assist her in some great money trouble, but that kind of thing only makes it very much worse."

"Very much worse," says Mrs. Macscrip; "myself I never will know artists; I am thankful that I did not infringe on my rule for her."

"You may be so, indeed!" says Mr. Silverly Bell, and he sighs.

"My! she arn't hard up for money; that I'll bet *some*," says Mrs. Henry V. Clams, casting cake to the peacock. "She's took Rocaldi to shut herself up in for good and all, and she won't sell that queer picture Sordello, though they'd give her long chalks for it if she would."

Mr. Silverly Bell sighs again, and as he stoops over the daisies, murmurs—

"Infatuation—aberration!"

"You don't call on her never now?" asks Mrs. Henry V. Clams.

Mr. Silverly Bell feels his silvery hair rise erect from his head.

"Call! *Call*? My dear madam——!"

"You are so almighty virtuous, Mr. Bell, you'd have saved Sodom and changed Lot into salt," cries that giddy soul with a fine Scriptural confusion of memories. "Alberto, bring the break round, and go and get my shawl."

"Dear Mr. Bell feels as we all do," said Miss Marjory Scrope-Stair. "Any friend of dear Joan's must hold *her* as an enemy: and any friend of poor Io's also. Besides, any woman must feel skocked and grieved. Why is talent always allied to a deficient moral character?"

No one replies to this general interrogation, but Mrs. Henry V. Clams clinches the matter.

"She's a downright silly not to give it all the go-by, and run back and lark around in her own Paris. Nobody can't ever understand artists though, they're that queer. . . . Riddle-me-ree and double acrostics is nothing to 'em. Is Alberto gone to get that drag?"

Meanwhile Ioris hears what the Lady Joan is saying.

Some one has asked her if she stays the summer here, and she answers, with a smile:—

"Oh, yes; you know I have so much to do here; they would miss me so. I even think we shall winter here. It is so much

warmer than the city, and we are all so happy together. Besides, you know, poor Io is ruined, or very nearly. We shall help him if we live here; you know how great my husband's friendship is for him, and mine too. We mind no sacrifice for a friend. I am going to build four new rooms, by the way; there are ninety-six rooms in the house, but a hundred will be nicer. I shall leave the walls bare till dear Tom Tonans and Pietra Infernale come to stay with me in the autumn; they will paint them for me. Perhaps Io will be away by then. I do hope we shall get something good for him through Theodore."

Ioris, standing by, hears; and he has lost the power and the right to avenge.

The drag comes round and other equipages. They troop away joyously, leaving only Burletta, who is casting up accounts in a memorandum book, in the midst of the strawberries: and Marjory Scrope-Stair, who, as she passes her friend, kisses the hand that is toying with the guitar, and kisses it gushingly but loyally. It is the hand that has fast-locked the fresh fetters.

Mrs. Henry V. Clams, who is shrewd in her own way, and has brought a gleam of the national Yankee humour with her out of the land of wooden nutmegs, is tickled at what she has heard, and laughs to herself as she departs.

"My word!" she murmurs as she drives through the gates. "If Alberto were to go and fall in love with anybody I wonder if I'd be as clever as that, and be able to turn the tables on the other one and make *her* look like the good-for-nought? My word! no, I shouldn't have patience—I should just go and slap her face."

And she feels her own inferiority to the Temple of the Virtues.

The afternoon sun sinks lower; the colour deepens; the scent of the blossoms grow stronger, Burletta shuts up his account-book and comes and sits on a stool beside the guitar.

Mr. Challoner reclines in a rocking chair.

The little girl plays with a shuttlecock.

Lady Joan laughs, and now and then she sings.

She has condemned him to perpetual bondage, to lifelong weariness, to endless degradation; she has taken his life like a pressed fruit and wrung it to the core; she has exiled from him all joy, all hope, all peace. Never shall his offspring laugh in the old home of his fathers; never shall any child smile in his eyes with the smile of a woman he loved; never shall any gladness of liberty rise for him in his barren years; never shall any human happiness be his!

Never: never any more, so long as her life shall last and feed on his, and sit by his, and wait and watch, as the tigress waits and watches by the creature it has slain.

She has killed him more cruelly than those do, who slaughter the body.

But what of that? She is well-content.

She shoots her cats and robins, she garners her grain, she fills her purse; she rules at Fiordelisa.

Honour is gone from him, and peace, and hope, and God.

But what of that? She rules at Fiordelisa.

In his chamber alone sits Ioris, having escaped the scene for a moment.

His heart is sick, his life is weary.

For lack of an hour's courage he has surrendered all his future to bondage.

One single falsehood at the first has sprung up into a giant tree, poisonous as the upas, and spreading in fetid darkness for evermore betwixt him and the light of heaven.

He sits in his solitude—so rare a blessing is this solitude, which she perpetually denies him—and the smell of the smoke and the tinkle of the guitar rise in the air to him, and he loathes them.

"Io! Io!" cries a voice, shrill, loud, imperious. "Io! come down directly, or I shall come up to you!"

Of the two evils he takes the lesser.

He goes down, with a heavy sigh and a slow step.

It is for this woman that he has lost the world, and lost the thing that is greater and deeper than all the world—a love that never dies.

He descends his old stone staircase wearily and listlessly; sullenly and silently he enters the court, and throws himself into a garden-seat in the shadow of an arched doorway.

She strikes her guitar sharply.

"You look as glum as an owl, Io! How ungrateful of you, when we are going to make your fortune out of the Coral Isles!"

"I am tired," he mutters wearily.

She laughs: she does not care whether he is tired or not. she has him safe, her prey for ever, through one sad untruth.

The red sun sinks, the red flowers blaze. The child is at play. The smoke curls lightly up amongst the blossoms. It is dreamy and warm. Mr. Challoner, stretched peacefully in his chair, dozes, with a handkerchief over his closed eyes, and thinks. . . . The Coral Isles are distant. Ioris is poor. A little more speculation, like the piles in the Syrens' Sea, and who knows? Old lands are soon ruined and old names soon tarnished. Fiordelisa is a nice place. Ioris is not very strong. It would make a pretty dower for Effie in years to come; and is there not a title that goes with the estate?

Mr. Challoner in his mind's eye sees the children of Effie reigning here, where the children of Ioris will be never born.

The Watchdog sits humbly in the shade by the glass doors, and works at a cushion that her friend has begun and has tired of, and ever and again fastens thirsty, longing, anxious eyes upon Ioris, and thinks to herself, *Festina lente! Pazienza!* Who knows? Sometimes a sick and sorrowful soul, jaded and indifferent, falls to the watcher that waits for it, as the beautiful moth with broken wing falls into the web of the patient and crafty spider spinning in the dust: who knows?

Mr. Challoner's wife, with the riband of the guitar lying loose in her hands, shuts her watchful eyes also, and only does not dream because she so seldom commits such a folly. She is a woman of action, not a simpleton. She thinks instead; thinks, and smiles as she thinks.

She has got all she wants, has done all she wished, she is luxuriously content; she feels victorious as the great Napoleon. She will reign alone at Fiordelisa. Meanwhile, if they become needful, there are Theodore and the Coral Isles. If Ioris prove restive she will send him to the Coral Isles, and go into society and smile and be smiled at, and say, "Ah, poor Io! so sad; but we are doing all we can to save his property."

And she and Society will smile on each other more sweetly than ever; and as she thinks of all this, the picture pleases her so that for once her busy brain grows sleepy, and she also dreams, till the guitar glides off her knee, and the chords that have hymned her amorous songs, so often, to so many ears, are broken.

Ioris alone dares not dream, because for him hope is dead and liberty has perished.

At the same hour as the sun sinks low Etoile prays in her chamber.

"Forgive me that I erred in haste and pain. Forgive me that I had neither wisdom nor strength. Ah, God, forgive me and make him happy, though I for ever suffer!"

Is prayer only a dream too?

THE END.

February, 1879.



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